

My Fiance's falls in love
with my sister. 2
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婚約者の妹に恋する

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My Fiance is in Love with My Little Sister

— Konyakusha wa, watashi no imouto ni koi o suru —

- Volume 2 -

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[Nocta'sHermitDen]

Chapter 18

If this is the real end (1)

What was essential to do when I woke up in the morning, was to not get up until I was properly awoken. Even when a maid came close, until I could clearly perceive that I was “me”, I kept my eyes closed and concealed my breathing. After inhaling deeply and chanting my name several times, I would finally make the preparations to open my eyes. Telling me that everything was alright, I would greet the morning sun while praying that *that* time hadn’t come yet. Every time I needed the resolution to live through the day.

After that tea party, numeral deaths were recalled inside me. Along with the recognition that the same time has started again, merciless endings were thrust before me. That was why I had to take measures to save myself. Not letting Silvia die, not being abandoned by Soleil, continuing to remain by his side as his fiancé, as his wife. These were in other words, choices to protect myself, choices to save this love.

However, were they really the right choices?

“My lady, a sealed letter has arrived from the marquis’ house.”

The maid handed me a letter engraved with the crest of the marquis family after I finally got up from bed. Receiving a sealed letter was quite unusual. When I cut the seal at once, the familiar stiffed characters briefly informed me of the matter at hand. I read over it twice, thrice, checking the content. After finishing reading, a sigh unconsciously escaped from my mouth.

“...My lady?”

“Because Soleil-sama will come visit, I would like you to please make the preparations for lunch.”

“Yes, I understand.”

“Also... about Silvia’s condition, how is she feeling today?”

“...about Silvia-sama?”

“Right. If that child’s condition seems fine, I would like you to prepare lunch for three persons.”

As I asked this while soaking my hands in the bowl of water prepared for washing the face, the maid answered with a “I understand.” Although the visit was a bit too sudden, after assuming the letter would accurately arrived on the right day and time, it still could count as asking for an invitation. When it’s so sudden like this, it’s impossible to decline. It seemed like Soleil was asking for the permission to come visit, but in reality, it was an ordering behavior that was born out of his high status as a marquis. At the end of the letter, if it was written to invite my little sister by all means, then I could not disregard it.

It seemed that Soleil was steadily deepening his intimacy with Silvia who had started to attend the academy. In order for Soleil who was in the knight division to come in touch with Silvia who was on the normal curriculum, he needed to arrange beforehand a time and place to meet. The school buildings were separated, and above all the cursus organization for the knight and the normal divisions were completely different. Since the knight training which contained actual fighting had a different schedule, if he didn’t contact her in advance, it would be really difficult to spend lunch time together. That was why the two of them eating in the cafeteria together attracted a lot of attention. Because despite the fact his fiancé was attending the same academy, he left her alone and spent time with her little sister instead.

However, it was highly likely that Silvia hadn’t noticed all these various circumstances. Probably not understanding well the structure of the academy itself, the young girl who was attending school for the very first time didn’t have any person she could call a friend either. For that reason, nobody pointed out the situation to her. Maybe at such a time it was my role as her older sister to show her the ways, but I knew it would be a bother if I were to cut into their conversation needlessly. Because of my foolish acts until now, because I threaten every woman who had approached Soleil, if I interfered now, people would say that I even kept in check my own little sister due to my jealousy. I understood that quite clearly.

At this point in time, no matter how much I struggle, the situation wouldn't take a good direction. Suddenly, my back trembled when a certain thought crossed my mind. What should I do if all my actions were useless? What on earth was I here for?

"What would you like to do about your attire?"

"Because I will change clothes one more time after that... well, that one will be fine."

When I designated a section of the dressing room, an excellent maid nodded once without inquiring about anything. Soon, she brought back a simple dress exactly like the one I was imagining and helped me change into it. Meanwhile, I gave instructions for lunch to be prepared in the reception room. Although our visitor's arrival was abrupt, since the estate's kitchen was filled with various ingredients it will not really be a problem. While I won't have time to arrange every detail like for that tea party some time ago, it shouldn't be inadequate.

"I will be in the archives until it is time for lunch. If there is anything, please call me."

"Yes lady."

After confirming the maid had nodded dependably, I headed for the archives. While it was incomparable to the academy's library, the collection of books gathered by the successive generations of the heads of our earl family was still quite impressive. The top of the tall bookshelves couldn't be reached without using a stepladder. There, thousands of books were lined up tightly without any gap. It seemed the successive butlers had properly inventoried everything, but without the permission of the head of the family you couldn't browse through it and it was also not easy to borrow it. Among the collection, some books were considerably costly, and since they were all part of the properties and assets of our house, the index listing where everything was strictly safekept. In other words, I couldn't see it. If I had that catalogue at hand, my research would have progressed much more smoothly.

In that place, I was looking for a description related to Crow. Since several of my previous lives ago, each time after I recalled my memory, I began investigating about him. I knew that Crow wasn't an ordinary person. He might be a kind of fairy or spirit,

or maybe a magician or an illusionist, or a being that didn't carry any physical substance like a phantom. Since he could use those kind of techniques or magic, whether he was a human being or a different species, there was no doubt he was a special existence. That was why there was the possibility something about him would be recorded in the books. I searched through various records such as literary works and history books, biographies and folklore stories. For now, there never had been a description of someone like him, but I couldn't give up on the one in a million likelihood of finally finding it. I returned the book I finished reading to its shelf and took a new one. By doing this, little by little I proceeded with my search. But I didn't know how many thousands of books there were in that place only, and including the academy's library, even if I were to spend my whole time reading I couldn't finish everything in a lifetime. In fact, in each life when time went back, I divided the total amount of books and continued reading. The shelves I must search for this life are these one. The shelves for my previous life are those one. Using every spare moment in my daily life, I pursued his existence.

"...My lady, if you cannot reach something, please call for someone."

As I had climbed on the stepladder to pick a book, a voice echoed in the archives where no one was supposed to be. I didn't know when he had arrived, but my escort Al was looking up at me with his eyebrows wrinkled in a frown. That no sign had betrayed his presence was the proof of his excellence as a knight.

When I laughed and told him it was fine, he immediately countered with a, "It is not fine at all." *If you told me the title, I would bring the book to your room*, he said with a sullen expression, but I shook my head. To begin with, even I didn't really know what I was looking for. When I tried to step down with the book in my hand, he immediately supported my arm. As I laughed wryly because of the feeling of being escorted, he added with an increasingly sullen face, "What will you do if you were to slip off?" At that moment what passed through my mind suddenly, was the thought that I hadn't experience such a death among all the type of accidents until now. That being the case, if I fall down from the stepladder at worst I would probably end up with a bone fracture.

"...My lady? Are you listening?"

As expected, I couldn't say it was fine because I wouldn't fall, so I nodded in a hurry. *Do you really understand?* I gave the sighing Al a sidelong glance, scolding myself for being possessed by gloomy thoughts. In this life where I was always conscious of the awaiting end at the moment I awoke every morning, where should I find any happiness? Since long ago, I hadn't been able to grasp the answer. I went through every day just for the sake of living. My present only consisted of accumulating those days.

That might be the reason why I was looking for Crow.

In that time that repeated itself, the people who appeared were mostly the same. If this life was made into a story, it would be impossible for the usual characters to change. And yet, there were times when Crow would appear before me and times when he wouldn't. Even if he was maybe observing me from somewhere I didn't know, I couldn't be sure of his existence. In one of my lives, I wandered around the city looking for Crow. When I found a young man with black hairs, I systematically called out to them. The people around walked away, avoiding me who kept calling with all her might the strange name Crow. There were even some people who laughed and pointed their fingers at me. If Crow had been at those places, I don't think he would have pretend not seeing me. Despite the fact that even his existence was uncertain, I somewhat understood what kind of person he was. Perhaps, in that life, Crow hadn't been here.

Still I wanted to keep looking for Crow. If his appearance has changed, it might be impossible to find him. But I definitively wanted to see him. It's not that I particularly wanted him to do something. I wasn't wishing for him to lend me his help, or to save me. I just wanted to see him.

"...My lady, what are you searching for?"

In the end, I couldn't read the books I chose in the archives, so I went back to my room while having Al carrying them. Since lunch time was approaching I had to change clothes. If Silvia joined us, I had to make sure we didn't wear the same color and give the impression we were harmonized. Whether it was a light or a dark color, everything suited that child with her silver hairs and her white skin so transparent her blood vessels were shown through it. This was because that child's body itself didn't have any color. But due to those hairs of mine which looked like those of an old woman, I must carefully choose what to wear. Even if my skin was white, it was nothing special

enough to be mentioned. I didn't have any peculiar features.

"I wonder what I'm looking for?"

"...Even though you don't know what it is, you are searching for something?"

Dropping his line of sight on the spine of the books which clearly belonged to different field of expertise and had no uniformity between them, Al wringed his neck in wonder.

"No, it is because I do not know that I am investigating it."

"...I don't really understand."

When I moved my eyes to the portrait of Silvia which was adorning the end of the corridor that had fallen silent, the voice of my little sister called out behind me, "Big sister...!" I turned back while smiling wryly because of the timing that made it looked like the voice had soared from the painting and saw the silhouettes of my little sister walking toward me, together with my fiancé. Even though I was wondering why they were together, I didn't let it show in my behavior. I just quietly bent my knee, greeting them "Good day to you, Soleil-sama." "Ah!" Instead of letting Soleil answer, with a smile devoid of any malice, Silvia told me happily,

"It seems he arrived a little bit earlier than planned. Because I couldn't find you big sister, we were waiting in the parlor a little while ago, but..."

Today she seemed to be healthy. Her figure with her cheeks faintly died in red was the appearance of health itself. Because I had asked the maid to confirm Silvia's condition, she was probably informed of Soleil's visit. She was wearing light make-up for our guest and was dressed a little more gorgeously than what she would wear ordinary. Since Soleil was a person of higher ranking, it could be said that it was natural to wear formal attire. That being the case, the one who was being impolite was me. Moreover, since I was touching books covered in dust just earlier in the archives, the hem and cuff of my dress had been whitened by it. It was conspicuous because I had chosen a

deep blue, dark colored dress. Although dust was only sticking to the sleeves, those white untidied spots made it looked like an old clothing. A smile escaped my lips when I thought I truly looked like an old woman now.

“...Ilya?”

Standing alongside Silvia, Soleil gave me a quizzical look. “...It is nothing, please do not mind me.” When I shook my head, he made an increasingly doubting expression. Seeing him like this, I felt that at any moment he would blame me and say, “What are you scheming?” I didn’t think I looked that much like a villain. But he seemed to think otherwise.

“I have order for lunch to be prepared in the reception room. There is still a bit of time left before it is ready, so would you like to have some tea in the meanwhile?”

After I said that, Silvia happily clapped both her hands and exclaimed, “The other day, I just found a new tea...!” Seeing Soleil’s eyes slightly relax as they reflected her appearance, a tiny bit of pain rose in my chest. I was thinking this scene was bringing me sense of déjà-vu but suddenly, I also thought that feeling might be a bit more like nostalgia. In the past, I would have been hurt by his attitude. But now, my heart had become calm... No, I may be desperately suppressing my heart that was about to tremble.

It’s a fragrant tea that will surely suit Soleil-sama’s taste, said Silvia while directing an imploring gaze toward me. With a nod, I pretended to keep my composure and showed them a smile as I answered, “That is perfect. I will go back to my room to change my clothes, in the meantime, please, take care of your big brother and serve him some tea.” *We have yet to be married but you are already showing me that joking display.* Would it be silly of me to say such a thing when I knew those two’s feelings? Or maybe it could be perceived as sarcasm? However, Silvia looked like she didn’t care the slightest bit about it, those thin fingers of her approached Soleil’s arm. They were touching yet not touching. With such a subtle sense of distance, their emotions could clearly be seen through.

I, who was simply watching this, I wondered how I looked?

If it had been the me before I introduced Soleil to Silvia, letting them be alone together would be a make-believe, I would never give them the opportunity.

“...My lady,”

Would I yell in a loud voice? Or, would I come between the two of them, shaking off the slender arm of Silvia while screaming, “Don’t come near Soleil-sama!”?

“My lady, what is wrong?”

At that time, I wonder what kind of expression Soleil would make to look at me..... No, what kind of expression did he make to look at me?

“My lady...!”

When I looked up because of the voice that abruptly burst in my ears, Al was there, calling out to me with a low tone. As his position was that of my escort knight, he couldn’t raise his voice. Since I had been lost in my thoughts, my shoulders quivered and I was suddenly drawn back to reality. But right away, I took a small breath to calm down and not let anyone perceive it. I moved my line of sight to check if my reaction had been sensed by Soleil and Silvia, but they hadn’t pay even a little bit of attention to me and had increasingly reduced the distance between them compared to a while before. As if to tell him a secret, Silvia put her hand on her lips and approach her face from Soleil’s. Even though the audible content of their conversation was simply some gossip, by only standing side by side, the two of them looked somewhat dazzling. While I was thinking that scene looked quite familiar, Soleil suddenly said to her, “Then, I’ll be counting on you, Silvia.” “Yes!” She exclaimed and turned toward me with her cheeks still carrying a tinge of red. It was exactly the expression of a young girl in love.

My thoughts were simply, how adorable it was.

“...Ilya?”

As I once again became absentminded, Soleil threw me an inquisitive look. “Oh, then... Silvia, I naturally have no problem with you preparing some tea, however you cannot do it in your own room.” I thought it was a needless fear but when I added this just in case, sure enough, Silvia tilted her head with a bewildered expression. Even if hereafter it was planned they will become a family, currently Soleil and Silvia were complete strangers. A noble’s daughter wouldn’t be praised for being alone in a room with a male who was not a family member. Because we didn’t know what kind of rumor could be spread by the servant who liked to gossip. However, Silvia didn’t understand this well.

Silvia had been carefully, carefully raised, shut inside a birdcage. My lovely little sister.

“...Why is it not good?”

She uneasily looked toward Soleil with a supplicating and puzzled gaze. The one who hold the most authority here was him. In spite of this place being my parents’ house.

“Since in this mansion there are only trustworthy people, it is alright.”

I suppose I can guess what you are trying to say, but what are your basis for it? Moreover, your little sister is not someone who would betray you, right? He said. Even now, I knew that Silvia who couldn’t comprehend what we were saying was looking toward me with an imploring expression. I couldn’t look back straightforwardly at those eyes. Although I haven’t done anything bad, why was it that I couldn’t get rid of the feelings of guilt? Despite the fact I couldn’t go against Soleil’s opinion, ultimately, the final decision was entrusted to me. Wasn’t it excessively unfair?

When they said it was only drinking tea in her room, it would only be that. As I was making a strange expression, maybe the one who was abnormal was me. However,

even if they let the door of the room opened so that people could see the interior, human beings were creatures who tended to twist the truth for their own convenience. At the moment an ill-intended person would see their harmonious interactions inside the room, we didn't know what they would make of it.

"Ilya, is there really a need to think so deeply about it?"

As Soleil said that, there was no other answer left.

"...Yes, you are right. I have put too much thoughts into this."

I intended to pretend to be calm, but by reflex my muscles contracted and my throat tightened. Although nothing especially happened, although this was supposed to be nothing... It hurt. I couldn't help but feel hurt. In this way, little by little I was losing various things.

"...Right then, Silvia, Soleil-sama, I will see you later..."

I bent my knees, apologized for the rudeness of leaving first and urged Al with my eyes. With a somewhat rigid expression he promptly bent his straight back in a salute and stood beside me to shield me from their lines of sight.

"Ilya, wait a moment."

Then, after I had walked a few steps, Soleil suddenly called out to me. When I turned wondering why he was still there, after he slightly opened his lips seeming to want to say something, he sunk into silence and glared at me fixedly. As I returned a few steps back thinking something had happened, for some reason Al cut himself between us to hold me back. While my line of sight was not completely blocked, he was exulting the kind of attitude that was saying he wouldn't allow me to go back. When I was puzzling over his unusually firm behavior,

“Ilya” Soleil called once again. “...You, why are you...”

This time, he broke the silence and started to say something, but as before he seemed to change his mind half-way and shut his mouth. His expression looked like he was sorrowful but also looked like it was not different from usual. I thought that, as expected, he was a person hard to read. Except for when Silvia was before him.

“Big brother, let’s go quickly!”

Silvia seemed to become impatient in front of our strange silent interactions and called out to him while acting like a spoiled kid. That action I could never ever do, my little sister could pull it off naturally. Her long hairs softly swayed, and even though I was standing at some distance away, a sweet scent wafted toward me. Her hairs were partly gathered at the top of her head but the rest were falling loosely on her back. This hairstyle drawn out to the maximum the charm of her beautiful hairs which were like silver threads.

“Big brother!”

“...Hmm, let’s go.”

Before long, the two of them walked away together, looking as if nothing had happened in spite of the earlier halt.

“My lady...”

As I was gazing over their retreating figures, Al called me with a worried voice.

“The one who will see others off, who will follow them with their eyes until they are out of sight, will always be me, right?”

“...My lady.”

“The one left behind, will always be me.”

When I thought back on everything that had happened, it had always been like this since the beginning. Since the time I introduced the two of them at that tea party.

As I remained beside the two of them who have established an emotional bond, my own emotions were always left behind.

Chapter 19

If this is the real end (2)

"My charming little princess."

Mother often said that while combing my little sister's hairs. As I looked at them, I thought it couldn't be help since she looked so lovely.

It wasn't like mother didn't love me..... That was probably what I tried to believe. However, rather than her own blood-related child, she loved and cherished Silvia a lot more. That was the truth. She would rarely come to my room, but I knew that she went to see Silvia without missing a single day. Before going to sleep, she would drop a kiss on her round forehead. I also knew that she would sing a lullaby with a voice full of love. Sneaking out of my room on a night I couldn't fall asleep, from the gap of the door that happened to have been opened, I saw the nonchalant routine of my mother and that child. *"Good night, mother."* *"Sweet dreams, my charming little princess."* Even though I clearly heard their voices, for some reason they started to vanish in the distance.

Lovely. That looked lovely. I also wanted that.

I wanted mother's gentle kiss. I wanted her hands to comb my hairs, show me her affection, hug me, I wanted her to call me her lovely little princess. I thought that mother would do it if I asked her for. If I coaxed her, if I put my request into words, I knew she wouldn't ignore it. While mother loved my little sister more, she wasn't a heartless person. That's why, if I had wished for it, I would have had my desires granted. Even if she didn't do it spontaneously. However in the end, I never even once received those gestures of affections.

Because I thought that if it was a love given reluctantly, then I had no need for it.

I might have been a young child at that time, but since birth I understood I was from the aristocracy. I was called "my lady" since I was a baby, was served by the people around me; raised in this fashion I was made to act and treat people a certain way. By the time I remembered words, inside my heart the notion of pride had already be

cultivated. Such worthless arrogance might have deprived me of my pureness and honesty. I, who was even hesitating to reach out to my own mother, had unconsciously built a wall inside my heart, and I came to behave as if I could never understand how to bare my heart and openly said what I wanted. The armor that I coiled around me by doing that, stayed with me as I grew up, unknowingly hurting me.

I didn't know if it was because of that, but I was always afraid of asking others for their help. Even though I knew that I, myself, was a very weak person, even at the critical moment I still couldn't ask for help. Just saying a single word would be enough, but how much courage would it take to actually say it? Did anyone understand the sorrow squeezing out such a word and freeing my voice from any obstacles would cost me? I was the noble daughter of the third ranked earl house. I, who was armed with such a heavy headgear, such a heavy title, while I was using it as a shield, at the same time I had also been bounded hands and feet by it.

"From today onward, you will become Soleil-sama's fiancé."

Therefore, you cannot act spoiled anymore, alright? Even though I felt I had never behave that way even once, that person said this with a gaze full of kindness and hugged me tightly. As if this would be the last time. Anyhow, she pretended having done this many times. My first hug with my mother was wrapped in an atmosphere sugary enough to make one's choke and it made me feel sick. At that moment I didn't know if it was alright for me to return her hug back, while watching my fingers wandering in midair, I noticed that mother and Silvia had the same smell. It smelled like the lingering scent of an incense. The young me simply thought it was strange. Why did my mother and little sister have the same parfum? I didn't realize the sense of discomfort that assailed me because only mine was different.

"You have been promised a bright future. Because you will become the wife of a marquis."

I didn't know what my mother's thoughts were when she said this. My mother looked at me with the same gaze she had when she was watching over her favorite porcelains, paintings or roses. Keeping that gaze on me, she declared distinctly, *In other words you are now under the custody of the marquis's house.* I guess I was too young to understand the meaning of those words.

.....When I was imprisoned in my first life, my parents turned their back on me. From time to time I remembered my father's face when he gritted his teeth with loath as he complained I had disappointed him. At that time, while I believed Soleil would come for me, on the other hand I also perceived that I had reached my end.

But then I thought about it. It wasn't like my parents had abandoned me at that moment. They had separated themselves from me step by step, little by little, as if they were piling up stones one by one, in a fashion where everything would eventually crumble once the weight couldn't be endured anymore. That first and also last embrace had namely been the first stone.

"...Why,"

As I had already decided on what dress to wear for lunch, while I was letting the maid help me get dressed, I looked at my reflection in the full-length mirror. The person standing here, was the not very special and quite ordinary "me". Even if I thought my hairs were like those of an old woman, actually, I had not lived until that old. Before my face will get wrinkles, I will reach the end of that short life. If it was so fleeting, was it selfish of me to wish to at least spend a satisfying life?

"My lady? Is something wrong?"

The sharp-eared maid tilted her head in wonder, having picked up words I was sure I had chewed up inside my mouth. When I shook my head, she closed her mouth and didn't ask anything anymore. She was truly an excellent maid who had served for a long time. Respecting my will, even if she was curious she didn't try to pry into my thoughts.

Brushing the hairs lying on my shoulders as if nothing had happened, she asked me, "How would you like to do your hairs?" She truly understood what was the correct question to ask in this situation. As I remembered the beautiful hairs of my little sister when she had been facing me earlier in the corridor, I wondered what I would like if I were to do the same hairstyle. In front of the lovely ephemeral appearance of the fairy, I was standing with the same haircut. Imagining that,

“...Fufu” I heaved a long breath blended with a little laugh.

Even if we had the same hairstyle, our appearance would still be as different as heaven and earth. Whether it was a coincidence or not, it would be inevitable for people to think I had tried to imitate my little sister. How ridiculous would that look?

There would only be me, my little sister and Soleil at the luncheon. The person who would compare us, will only be Soleil. But he would surely not realize that I have the same style as Silvia. The only one who would laugh at my stupid appearance, would be me.

I didn't like to be compared to Silvia, I always tried to choose something different from that child. A different hairstyle, a different lipstick, a different dress, different shoes, rather than picking things I liked, it felt more like I was choosing based on the criteria it must be different from Silvia. I think it has been like this since our childhood. In front of my little sister who was wearing a light-colored dress and was praised as being cute and adorable, I realized I should not wear that. A few days ago, I wore a dress of the same color, but nobody said it was cute or anything. When was it that I noticed the compliment “It suits you well” was only polite lip service devoid of any real meaning?

“...Can you tie my hair up please?”

The maid confirmed my order in a nod and skillfully braided my hairs with flower ornaments to make a beautiful hairstyle. When I saw the result once she was done, a thought suddenly crossed my mind. I intended to make choices, but as a matter of fact, I hadn't been able to choose anything at all.

“Hey, in reality, you like the color white, right?”

The one who noticed it was Crow. I liked white flowers regardless of their variety. So understandably, I liked white. Even though there was no need to think deeply to see that, no one in my entourage had ever noticed it. The colors I wore were always discreet; for casual attires it was dark or indigo blue, reddish-brown or a deep violet, only colors that wouldn't stand out. It wasn't like I was purposely choosing dark

colors. Simply, flamboyant ones didn't suit that plain face of mine. *"You really dislike bright color"* had said my mother with a wry smile. She hadn't realized even a little that I was yearning for my little sister's dresses.

The sole occasion on which I wore white, was on my wedding with Soleil that I had experienced countless times in my repeating lives.

Because it was a marriage, I was able to wear a dress of my favorite color unreservedly. Not feeling inferior to my little sister, not being compared to her by our surrounding. On the day only I was allowed to wear white, on that one and only day, I was truly able to pick out everything and anything myself. Standing alongside Soleil, I was showered with words of blessing and basked in applause.

That day was a day overflowing with happiness... Or rather, it should have been so. Each time I remembered the exaltation of that day, I was assailed by an anguishing pain, as if the inner part of my chest was being clawed by nails. Probably because I couldn't forget that Soleil's eyes only chased after Silvia's silhouette. In the end, the only person to admire the dress whose fabric and design I had chosen personally, had only been me.

"...Even if I dress up, there is no meaning."

"My lady?"

"...No, it is nothing. Thank you, I caused you some trouble."

"No, not all. That was nothing."

My appearance reflected in the mirror now that the maid had finished seemed to not have a single blemish. Befitting of a noble young daughter, the dress made of a fine quality material was a high-class item. When basking inside the light, the deep blue shade slightly changed. I narrowed my eyes in front of its beauty, however, I unintentionally lowered my eyes when I thought of the fact I was the one wearing it. No matter what I wear no one will pay it any mind, no one will feel anything when seeing it.

The day of that wedding, Soleil took a fleeting glimpse in my direction and said, *"So beautiful."* I remembered it well. For a brief moment my mood brightened. When I

looked up I saw him gazing at Silvia in the distance, his eyes shaken by an ardent emotion.

He had pretended to have addressed that compliment to me; his profile as he was in fact staring at my little sister, I have never forgotten it.

“It took you quite a while.”

I smiled bitterly at Soleil and Silvia who seemed to have been lying in wait for me in the parlor. Originally, the appointed time had been 30 minutes from now, so there should have been no reason to criticize me. But in the aristocratic society that was divided in ranks, as he belonged to a higher family, making him wait wasn't praiseworthy. It didn't matter that I was his fiancé or not. He had such a special social status.

“My apologies.”

“...”

When I lowered my head obediently, silence fell in the room. I wondered if he didn't feel like forgiving me. As I remained with my head hung down, unable to rise up my line of sight,

“Big sister, your hair ornaments are lovely.”

I didn't know if she read the air or made her remark without any ulterior thoughts, but Silvia rose up from her seat. She came to me who was standing near the entrance unable to move, and said,

“This dress, it is the first time I'm seeing it. It really suits you well big sister.”

She laughed softly with a smiling expression in her eyes.

She was a kind child. Without any maliciousness, she was trying to face me with the same pure heart than when she was a child. Despite not having seen many other people, my little sister was often watching me. Silvia's true nature had surely not changed since our childhood. She was the same as the little figure that had flew before me in the stable when I was about to be kicked by the horse. As I was her older sister, there was no way she would harbor any malice. My parents had gently covered Silvia's eyes so as to not let them reflect anything dirty or unsightly.

With this purity, with this kindness, this beauty, she will steal Soleil's heart.

For example, she might be the same as a princess from a fairy-tale. If they are captured, someone will come to their rescue, if they are in a dire situation, someone will extend a helping hand. Just by being here, they will be loved.

They were different from me. Because I...

"The two of you, isn't it time to sit down soon?"

As I was answering Silvia's praise for my dress, saying, *you are very pretty too*, Soleil's voice echoed. He sounded a little bit annoyed, was it because I was monopolizing my little sister's gaze?

Silvia lightly acknowledged his demand and flew back to him. I followed behind her. Her hairs were swaying gently, matching her vibrant pace.

"Your hairs,"

"...hum?"

"Your hairs, they look like the shadows of a grove of trees that are falling on the snow."

"...What? What do you mean?"

In one of my lives, as I was reflected in those black eyes of him, Crow said this with a little laugh. I had never mentioned my own assessment of my hairs in front of him. However, as if he had seen through my mind, he told me,

“I, rather than the pure white snow that had piled up in a plain, I think that the shadow of trees casted on that snow are much more beautiful.”

I didn't understand what his intentions were when he said this.

“But, when even the shadows of those trees are included, I would call it a snowy landscape.”

Crow said that and gently caressed my hairs.

“Snow is just snow. No matter what hair color you have, what eyes you have, what expression you make..... No matter who you are, I think you are beautiful.”

He was probably not trying to encourage or comfort me. Because Crow should not have known that I was comparing myself with Silvia and felt depressed. But, he always offered me the words I wanted to hear.

“...I've been told so by Saion-sama.”

“Don't pay attention to what Sai says. He is a nasty fellow...”

Even without saying anything, appetizers were brought to my seat. While eating them I watched as Silvia and Soleil were having a pleasant chat. Whether or not it was a continuation of their conversation when I met them in the corridor earlier, but apparently it seemed to be about Soleil's friend. Since they were usually having lunch

together, naturally, there probably had been opportunities to meet Soleil's friend. That person who I had never been introduced to, Silvia seemed to know him well.

"Big sister...? Is something wrong?"

It seemed you are not eating anything, said Silvia with a wondering expression. Although I picked up my fork at her urging, I quite couldn't swallow the food in my mouth.

"Are you feeling unwell?"

When I raised my eyes, Soleil was looking toward me with a wrinkle between his eyebrows. Until now, he hadn't even kept me at the corner of his field of vision. When he had follow Silvia's line of sight, even if he found it unpleasant he noticed me at that moment.

"...No"

Trying to shake my head, I took the initiative to declare, *I should go back to my room*. Because of my trembling fingers, the tip of the knife hit the porcelain and created some noise.

"Big sister...! Soleil-sama is here for your sake...!"

She probably thought I couldn't wait to leave my seat and stroke the plate with the knife on purpose in anger. While remaining humble, Silvia raised a reproaching voice. In tune with her, Soleil pulled down his lips.

When I reflexively casted my eyes down, my shoulders trembled.

"Ilya?"

I was almost about to laugh. Perhaps, from the start, everything had been a huge farce.

“I apology for the inconvenience I caused you. I will presume upon your benevolence but I think I should return to my room.”

When I put down my fork and knife and said that without raising my head,

“I will escort you back to your room.”

Soleil showed a worried behavior. It was the proper reaction as my fiancé.

“It is fine. It is not that far. Please, take your time Soleil-sama.”

“...Big sister, hum...”

“Silvia you too, do not mind me.”

I stood while exchanging the same kind of conversation than at that tea party where Soleil and Silvia met.

When I left the room, Al was waiting for me in the corridor as expected. Since my withdrawal was considerably earlier than it should have been, he made a puzzled expression, then he inquired if everything was alright.

I laughed and said I was fine, wearing the same smile as usual. Pretending that nothing had happened, I returned to my room. Then, the instant when the door opened, I took one deep breath, preparing myself. It was in order to suppress my expecting heart which wondered if a black bird was there or not.

“Nice to meet you, princess.”

I didn't know why he had called me like this the first time we met. It probably didn't have any meaning, even if I asked him he wouldn't give me an answer.

But in this world deprived of any hope, only him had given me the words I wanted to hear. The me of this current life, had remembered them many, many times over and over again.

Chapter 20

If this is the real end (3)

Silver hairs and purple eyes, that were my little sister's attributes. Since her birth Silvia had been special for our parents. Even though I didn't ask her to, a young maid who loved to gossip had told me various information I had not wished to hear. Like the fact that those colors my parents didn't possess had probably come from her biological mother.

"...You are having your lunch in such a place?"

In the back yard of the academy, I was seating on a lonely bench that had been left alone as if it had been forgotten, the light meal prepared by the chef of the estate spread in front of me, when suddenly a quiet voice echoed. When I looked up, the student's uniform told me he was from the knight curriculum. Since the color of his necktie indicated he was an upperclassman, I tried to stand up to greet him but he brushed his hand to force me to stay seated. From that gesture, I sensed he was someone of high standing. I was asked if it was alright to sit beside me, but I promptly shook my head to refuse. It wasn't good for a person with a fiancé to be alone with someone of the opposite gender. It would be a different story if maids and servants had been with us, but after I quickly looked around I saw that no one was there. While inside the academy it could be said we were all fellow students, because everyone was from the nobility it was simply better to be careful. The fact that everyone was of noble origin meant there was a high possibility that everyone had a partner decided since childhood. Just shaking my head might not convey my refusal clearly enough, so I softly phrased my rejection. But when I did that the man from the knight division made a puzzled expression and tilted his head. It was an expression that said he never expected to be turned down. Gazing at his face, I realized that it seemed vaguely familiar. When you were part of the high society, you will become acquainted with most people. I had never talked to him but when I was looking from afar, I might have seen him have a friendly chat with Soleil. The way he carried himself seemed to indicated nobody ever refused him, meaning he was of a high social standing. Perhaps he was the person from the rumors that started several weeks ago, the foreign student

who came from the neighbor country.

If I remembered correctly, it should have been someone from an eminent noble family.

If so, rejecting his request was not a profitable option. However, I wasn't confident he really was the man from the rumor, so I thought I should not act carelessly since there was no positive proof. Even at the best of times, rumors that Soleil and I had some discord between us were already circulating. If it became known that I had been alone with someone of the opposite sex, the blame would likely fall on me. No matter how Soleil conducted himself, it was hardly probable he would be criticized. Because that was what it meant to be the son of a marquis.

Keeping my face down to avoid to meet his eyes, I put the fruit I was holding back in the basket. I knew fully well it wasn't a proper attitude, however, if I abided by the custom of this country, it was not the time to inquire about his mood. Because I didn't know if someone would see us, I must leave that place as soon as possible. In the case he was really the foreign student from the neighbor country, I thought that my impolite behavior might become a problem, but there was no other choice but to feign and pretend being completely ignorant.

"...You, under that expressionless face of yours, you are thinking about various things, right?"

Apparently, he seemed to have been observing me all that time. Mixed in his voice was a clear puff of laughter. I understood I was been laughed at but because I had not expected such a foolish manner of speaking I rose my head in spite of myself. Then, I met eyes with him who was standing, looking at me. When I swallowed a small breath and slightly bent my upper body,

"Don't be frightened so much" he said with a bitter smile.

That gentle and intimate atmosphere strengthened my wariness on the contrary. In all my lives which repeat constantly, the people who tried to trick me always made a friendly expression. The great number of experiences I had accumulated until now taught me how to avoid danger, but it wasn't always useful. No matter how careful I

was and how many precautions I took, at the moment I failed, I'd fall. And once that happened, I couldn't stop it with my own strength.

"While I might be lacking in some aspects... I am also a nobleman's daughter, so being alone with a man other than my fiancé is..."

Although I didn't finish my sentence to explain it wasn't a good thing, my expression said it all. I specially chose words that would convey that staying here was troublesome for me since I had a fiancé. If the other was not greatly thickheaded, then he should comprehend my meaning. However, that man answered flatly with a dull, "Is that so?" before falling silent.

For some reason he didn't show any signs of intending to leave, so I made up my mind to surrender that place myself. As I got up while tidying up my meal,

"...It seems like I somehow got in your way, right?" he said as he sat down on the bench without asking for permission this time.

I shook my head and told him, "No, I was thinking it was about time to return to the classroom." The indigo blue eyes of the man looked up at me who was standing. That color that couldn't be described as bright awaken a feeling of nostalgia. If you saw it from a more sunny place, that color would surely be close to black.

"But you haven't eaten at all."

That unexpected retort caught me off guard just when I had bend a knee to say farewell.

"I think there is no need to be in such hurry. There's still plenty of time left. So, won't you lend me a bit more of your time?... Ilya Il Machisse-sama."

While I was considerably shaken to hear him say my name without any hesitation, the

thought, “as expected he knew,” also crossed my mind. If he was from an important family from the neighboring country, then he probably had learnt the custom of the place he intended to study in. Then he knew it wasn’t desirable to be alone with someone of the opposite gender who had a fiancé, and he purposely decided to disregard it. Despite being from a third ranked earl family of ancient and honorable descent, it was only a family lineage that was neither bad nor good, so him knowing my name brought me a sense of discomfort. Moreover, I was also convinced that he knew I was Soleil’s fiancé. Since Soleil’s home was a well-known marquis house, everyone knew about it. Moreover it wouldn’t be strange for his family to have friendly ties with high ranked aristocrats from other countries.

“...Oh? You don’t seem surprised.”

His carefree voice echoed in that extremely quiet garden. To begin with, this place was located at the most secluded inner part of the backyard, somewhere people seldom came. That was why I was having my lunch here. Because I didn’t have to mind the gazes of others, I didn’t have to deceive people with words, and I think I needed to have some time alone.

“No, I am quite surprised.”

In fact, because of the excessive astonishment words wouldn’t come out and I needed to take a small breath to calm down. As if they were trying to not miss the slightest of my movements, those indigo eyes were staring fixedly at me. If he had something to tell me I wished he would do it quickly.

“Your face won’t show your true nature. You’re the same as me.”

He laughed softly, and his attractive expression was full of youthfulness, but with this few minutes of conversation, I understood he wasn’t a person whose words and expression should be taken at face value. It wasn’t my first time confronting someone whose real intention couldn’t be read, but I had no intention to bargain with a complete stranger like him. In other words, I had no interest in learning what kind of

person he was.

However, once you missed the right opportunity, it was hard to grab the chance to leave.

By deliberately observing me with his fixed gaze, by making me aware of this action of his, he wanted to see how I would react. Because human beings were creatures whose true nature came out in a momentary action.

“...By the way, the fact you’re here all by yourself, is it because Soleil-dono is in the cafeteria with your little sister?”

The eyes of this man who said that like it was something of very little concern looked at me as if they wanted to probe me. Did he plan to launch a sudden attack? But when I was about to frown because of this odd feeling of tension he purposely created, I reflexively smiled instead. Seeing that, my opponent showed an evident admiration and blinked several times. He probably thought I was just an ordinary young girl and looked down on me. Certainly, if it had been before that tea party, I might have become flustered and raised my voice. On the contrary, I would probably have even denied the fact that Soleil and Silvia were together. Even if I knew the truth I wouldn’t have accepted it. If it had been the me from several months ago, there is no doubt I would have reacted like this.

“Soleil-sama is taking great care of my little sister. I have also been quite spoiled and allowed to depend on him.”

“...Spoiled and dependent?”

“I also have times when I wish to be alone and slip out from everyone’s view. However, my little sister enrolled in this academy just recently. She might become uneasy so it is best to have someone stay by her side. Originally it should have been my role to take care of her, but that child adores Soleil-sama like an older brother, so I entrusted her to him.

The words flew out without needing me to think deeply about it. There were many

people who were suspicious of Soleil and Silvia's relationship and were probing me, his fiancé, about it. They either were simply harboring a sense of justice and were trying to expose Soleil's faithlessness, or trying to ridicule me. Or there were also those who wanted to meddle in Soleil and Silvia's relation to help them achieve their love. There were various reasons. Every time, I answered with that appropriate excuse. And now it was evidently that time. Time to do the 'work' I had completely become accustomed to.

"...A 'brother', you said. That's..."

My remark made him heave a long sigh. That elegant and eminent noble from a foreign country made a subtle expression both like a sarcastic smile and a discouraged face. I didn't know what kind of reactions he was trying to draw out from me, but what he expected was surely different from my reply. However after a short moment of silent he took a small breath and continued,

"But, that's not how others see it, right?"

It was the reaction I had imagined.

"...Well, it is hard to tell. I cannot fathom what other people think."

When I showed him an expression of complete curiosity, he heaved a truly heavy sigh. That exaggerated breath would effectively make your opponent shrank if you were in his position. I didn't understand what he was after, but...

"Somehow, you... are different from what I imagined."

That pair of eyes which was looking up at me with a thoroughly perplexed appearance, had in fact become the gossip of the academy lately. Originally, nobles would often get married with fellow aristocrats of beautiful appearances, so they had quite gorgeous

looks, but even among them it could be said that he stood out quite a lot. That this plain appearance of mine was unnoticeable might be because this kind of person existed. The expression “standing out in a bad way” was surely a perfect description for me.

“I do not know how you imagined me to be but... will you be done soon?”

If you have no business with me, I want to leave immediately. I said this frankly. Then, the man shrugged both shoulders and declared without any shame, “But I haven’t even start talking with you yet.”

I felt like your exchange was somewhat meaningless.

“...What kind of business do you have with me?”

The way things were going, it didn’t seem like he would disclose his intentions, so there was no other choice but to take the stand to hear his story.

“Well, first. Let me introduce myself. Because you don’t seem to know me.”

He laughed and his smile deepened, making me notice the situation wasn’t heading in a good direction for me. It wasn’t appropriate to interrupt his words here. But if possible, I wanted to keep not knowing his name. Once we knew each other name, from that moment we would become something similar to “acquaintances”. If that happened, from now on, I won’t be able to pretend I didn’t know him when I’ll meet him. He probably completely understood this. That was why he was showing this smile that looked so refreshed it was unpleasant.

“Let’s start once again, young lady. My name is Saion Topias. I came from a nearby country to study.”

“A nearby country...?”

Since it wasn't an official presentation, he didn't say his full name. If it had been a formal event like a ball, abbreviating one's name was strictly forbidden. It would be seen as making light of the other party. According to his expression, it didn't seem like he was looking down on me, but there might be some deeper meaning to the fact he didn't give me his formal name. Besides, why did he not say the name of his country? If he was the foreign student from the rumor, then there would be no need to investigate and it would be easy to find out.

And more than anything, there was his name, "Saion". If I didn't hear it wrong, at that lunch several days ago Soleil and Silvia had brought up that name, moreover they said it with quite some familiarity. That being the case, it meant he was certainly acquainted with the two of them. And he had especially come in contact with me, Soleil's fiancé. Although I also took in consideration that he happened to stumble upon this place by coincidence, that possibility was quite low. It would still have been more natural to approach me through Soleil.

"Ah, it's good. That expression. That's the expression I wanted to see."

I was probably showing a suspicious expression. Saion smiled delightfully and leaned his upper body on the back of the bench... That unfathomable self-introduction he gave, I guessed it was merely to stir me up. After all this, I didn't feel like continuing to keep up appearances and decided to simply watch the situation unfold.

"In my country, political marriages are becoming a bad habit of the past era."

Suddenly his eyes that were looking at me narrowed. A third party might have wondered why he abruptly started to talk about that, but in light of the circumstances surrounding me, I could naturally see where this topic was headed.

"Of course, it doesn't extend to the aristocracy. The profits brought by political unions are large, there are also some times when choosing this is preferable in order to carry out one's duty as a noble. So, well, in the end, it mainly concerns the general populace."

“...”

“But, still it means that there is a bigger understanding and acceptance of marriage out of love than in this country.”

Until a certain time, more precisely until that tea party, there was no doubt it was quite visible. I would personally speak with Soleil in the academy, and while I didn't remember being particularly close to Soleil, before I knew it, my eyes would always chase after his silhouette. I kept in check the women who approached him, so it was very easy to understand what emotions I harbored toward Soleil. But after the tea party, Silvia started attending the academy, and as the distance between her and Soleil shortened, I began intentionally avoiding them. Soleil was my fiancé, Silvia was my little sister. So, if the two of them were having lunch together, I could also join them. It wouldn't be unnatural, rather for Silvia's sake it might have been better.

However, I didn't do that. Seeing them together was painful. Being at their side was distressing. When I was with them, memories I didn't want to remember would surface. That was why I tried to keep some distance between us. But because of these emotions I couldn't abandon, completely distancing myself was impossible.

“Say, what are your thoughts about separating two people who have feelings for each other?”

Saion who slowly got up from the bench stood beside me and whispered this like he was telling me a secret. Those words sank to the depth of my ear as if their had the weight of stones. When one's standpoint changed, the viewpoint would also change. That's was a matter of course. From my standpoint, the one who was separating I and Soleil was Silvia. From Silvia's standpoint, the one who was tearing her and Soleil apart was me. As for the people around us, they would side with their friends and allies and look at our relations from that standpoint. In other words, Saion wasn't my ally.

“You should release him.”

Right? Saying this like it was a trivial thing, Saion turned his heels. I had no words to

return at that departing figure. I wondered if my existence was such an eyesore? Even though instead, the one who wanted to be set free was me. I couldn't tell what I should say or do.

In one of my previous lives, that Soleil and Silvia were able to get married was because the circumstances had allowed it. Because the wedding ceremony couldn't be cancelled, and I had fled two days before it. As it had been necessary to find a replacement for me, inevitably Silvia had to take on the responsibility. Unless it was that much of an impending situation, my parents would not have let go of Silvia. Since that was so, with the current situation even if Soleil and I were to cancel our marriage, I didn't think that Silvia would be chosen as his partner. To begin with, because the Silvia at this point in time didn't possess enough refinement and education to become the next marquis's wife, no matter how much Soleil yearned for her, his house won't approve it.

All those various circumstances, Saion wasn't aware of them. And precisely because he didn't know, he was chasing after his ideals and wishes, seeking to fulfill his hopes.

As their friend, it wasn't strange for him to dream about a future where the two lovers could be together.

"...Hey! You, how long do you plan to stay in such a place?"

From a little far away, Saion who had turned toward here said that in a loud voice. It might be to inform me that lunch break was over, or he might be trying to make me aware of my current condition. But, yes, really...

...I, how long, will I stay in that place?

Chapter 21

If this is the real end (4)

“I no longer love you.”

When I put them out loud, I managed to say those words without much difficulty. The painful cramp in the depths of my chest was a remnant of the “memories” from the numerous lives I have accumulated. Even though I certainly thought it was painful, I also felt that I had built up a resistance to the pain that had been steadily carved in this body. For that reason, I thought that if I tried to not mind it, I could manage it somehow.

“I no longer.....”

In the library that had become deadly silent because nobody was here anyway, I pretended to read a book and whispered it one more time. Then, I noticed that my lips were trembling. It was painful and felt as if my struggling breath was blocked in my throat, and instinctively I tightly grasped my neck with both hands. Simultaneously a strained laugh leaked out from my lips because I realized what I was doing. I was strangling my neck as I imagined the incident that hadn’t happened presently. I hadn’t lost myself to the point of not noticing this foolishness.

“.....love, you.”

The disconnected words that I muttered a second time melt into the air, leaving behind a trailing note. However, those words that lost their existences as sounds still coiled around this body and wouldn’t leave it. There were words imbued with that much meaning. In all those lives until now, for Soleil’s sake, for my little sister’s sake, but also for my own sake consequently, I tried to convey it many times. I knew lying to myself was the best method and I thought I should do that. Just a single word, if I could say it, Soleil and I could have moved forward to form a more positive relation.

If we didn't love each other. If we didn't harbor any feeling.

A plain and indifferent relation should have been permitted. Building a relation of trust as two work partners strictly would be alright. Even if we couldn't become a harmonious couple, in order to defend the territory, we could have fabricated a partnership that would have taken the name of "family." And yet, in every life, I never could convey those words.

"Why?"

I wonder why I've fallen in love with Soleil. In those lives that kept repeating again and again, I also kept repeating this question again and again. Even though I knew I won't receive an answer, without never ever coming to an end this doubt never get swept away. In that day in my childhood, in that moment, I remembered the sensation that appeared when our eyes met. No matter how many lives accumulated, no matter how much time passed, that emotion never faded. Rather than describing it as falling in love, it was more correct to say that something felt. If I dared name that event. If that hapless fate was the works of God.

Then it was exactly like a divine revelation.

No one would call this moment falling in love. I understood this well. But without doubts, I could say that my life started at the instant I met Soleil. In that unfamiliar place where I couldn't hide how tensed I was, those almond eyes which slightly loosened as I was told "*It's alright*", "*Don't worry, it's alright*" while presenting me that small hand, I could never forget them. Even the tone of his voice seemed to be revived and echoed in my ears. At that moment, my heart started to beat out and time started to tick away. It was soft, but even now I could remember the sensation of that hand that grasped mine tightly. I could feel it right now as if it was being done this instant. If I curved my fingers, it felt as if I was holding his hand. Because his white skin suited his thin-iced eyes, I had imagined that it would feel like touching ice, but of course his hands hold warmth. My hand which had seldomly been grasped by my parents, I remembered how he wrapped both of his hands around it.

Each time I recalled those fingertips that glided on the back of my hand to make me feel reassured, the words said by Soleil, "*It's alright*," had their importance increased and were transformed into something special. Receiving the unbearable heavy

responsibility of the being the fiancé of the Marquis's son, although sometimes it left me petrified, those words the young him said merely a few times, for better or worse, they gave me a push on the back.

"...Alright."

In the dead silent library, only a few students remained. Surrounded by the bookshelves, large desks which allowed several people to sit down for studying were lined up in an orderly fashion, but during daytime there was enough room for me to sit alone on that shared desk. That's why, even though we were in the same room, each person was sitting at a very distant position. The distance was such that it permitted me to speak to myself in a whisper. Even if my muttering voice was overheard, naturally, other people would not know what I was saying.

"It's alright."

I tightly clasped my trembling hands, repeating the words the Soleil of the past had told me. However, it felt exactly as if I was reciting a line in a story, it wasn't accompanied by the slightest emotion. Even though the young me had certainly been rescued by those words. Even though those words always had pushed my back. Now, they had no meaning.

....."Say, what are your thoughts about separating two people who have feelings for each other?"

I suddenly recalled Saion's words. Even if it has only been a few hours since then, it already seemed to have happened a very long time ago. Speaking of what I did after staying paralyzed, unable to say a single word back to him: I went to the afternoon class, wearing a composed expression as if nothing had happened. It was an expression of ignorance in order to pretend to be unaware of the rumors about Soleil and Silvia that were sure to come at me. If I didn't know anything it meant I wouldn't have to do anything, I averted my eyes from the behavior of my fiancé. Seeing me act like this, the students of the academy mocked me with smiles full of scorn, seemingly being waiting for the opportunity to taunt and make fun of me. They were surely waiting for the moment I would commit a blunder. Because there is no doubt that if it

had been the me from not long ago, she would have marched straight into the groups which were amusing themselves with the gossips. So, I was only looking forward. Not hanging down my head and lowering my eyes was my small form of resistance. That was the only thing I could do. There was no way to correct my past behavior that I was guilty of. The me from the time when I was keeping in check every single woman who approached Soleil, was in fact trying to chase after myself. Now I must remain absolutely silent while avoiding any action that would stand out.

Those two were conspicuous. No matter what they were doing I could know without even having to ask anyone. But although I knew things would be like this, when I heard people say those two naturally looked good together, I couldn't be help but be in low spirits.

Several seconds, several minutes, several hours. Increasing over time, an uneasiness similar to sorrow blocked my respiration. It's painful. Incredibly and irremediably painful.

Even though I went to the same school, even though I was his fiancé, I had never been invented to have lunch together. This lunch time that had a different meaning from those compulsory luncheons we took turn to attend in each other estate, Silvia enjoyed them like it was something granted and natural. There was no way I wouldn't feel anything about that. I was hurt, angry and sad. If it had been the me of the past... if it had been before that tea party, I probably would have drowned Silvia in jeers. Even though the one to blame wasn't her. While I knew that, the brunt of my attacks was still directed at my little sister. The reason why it was like that was because women altogether were such creatures. But I knew very well how foolish such behavior was and presently I couldn't act that way even by mistake. Moreover, if I were to raise my fist, I already knew what kind of reaction Soleil would show. He would be disgusted, then, with a glare mixed with disappointment and scorn, he would ask in a sigh, "Why do you not care about your little sister?"

There was no doubt that he had asked my such a question in one of my previous lives. Soleil expected me to behave like a kind older sister.

"...It's alright, everything is fine."

No, that, I decided to lie like that.

“.....Ilya-sama...?”

Just when the fingers of my tightened hands were digging into my palms, the voice that called out to me dispersed my thoughts. Golden hairs appeared at the corner of my field of vision, even without confirming her face I knew it was Marianne. No one else had such a magnificent color.

“...You haven’t gone home yet?”

That whispering voice sounded liked it was speaking to oneself. Suddenly, her line of sight dropped to my hands.

“So even you Ilya-sama, is reading that book?”

As if amazed by what she saw, Marianne gently narrowed her eyes and pulled a chair beside me to sit down. “I have a rendez-vous with him” She read the title and showed a sweet smile that looked very joyful.

“...Unexpected, isn’t it?”

That book that I’ve read many times since long ago, didn’t belong to the library but to me. Although the cover was plain, only stating the author’s name and the title, the year it was published it became a hot topic of conversation among the nobles’ daughters. Because it was such a well-known work, everyone knew at least its title.

“I only know the title and a little bit about the plot but... it is a story about the princess of the neighboring country and a knight falling in love, right?”

“Yes, that is the story.”

“Isn’t it a classic among love story? However, it feels more like a fantasy, a pipe dream... I cannot say it looks realistic...”

Marianne stopped her sentence here, tilted her head, and added in a laugh, “Ah, but if you like it, I apologize for my critics.” Although her words were disapproving of the novel, I knew there wasn’t any malice in them, so I shook my head at her excuse. Seeing this, she laughed once again.

“Ilya-sama, I thought you were a realist.”

“...A realist?”

“Someone who doesn’t have naïve dreams.”

The light of the setting sun flowing through the big window shone on her glittering hairs, dazzling my eyes. It was utterly impossible for my ashen hairs to shine like this.

“...I do not know the conclusion of this novel, but the main character surely meets a happy ending?”

“Yes, that is the case.”

When I nodded my head to confirm, Marianne made a troubled expression with her slender fingers supporting her chin.

“What is bothering you?”

“The princess falls in love with a knight from the neighboring country and finds happiness, doesn’t it mean that she became tied with the person she loved? But... you know... I really wonder if a princess marrying a mere knight is a happy ending...”

That daughter of a middle ranked noble house who I found much more realist than me, heaved a sigh while she gave a smile mixed with a tinge of disgust. If we were to

she speak of court rank, her house was much closer to the high aristocracy than mine. She was tied down to her house, had to marry for political reasons and couldn't run away, everything was the same as me. But the critical difference between us was the fact she was loved by her fiancé. For me, it was clearly this that seemed like a dream story.

"Also, the princess probably had... No, it's possible that... the knight too, they both may have had fiancés, right?"

I wonder if such a character appears in that novel, said Marianne as her beautiful face showed a trace of grief. The main plot of this novel was how the princess was exiled from her home country due to a civil war and how the knight that was ordered to guard her by royal decree falls in love with her. Various obstacles stand between them, but at the end everything settle down and all is resolved in peace. They weren't any misfortunate characters and the progression of the plot only gave some kind of vague concept of what coercion meant, but it seized the hearts of the nobles' daughters. That's why naturally, a character that should obviously have existed like the princess's fiancé never shows up in the story. Even Saion had said it. No matter if love marriage were becoming the norm among common people, this won't happen for nobles. All the more for royalty. If compared to the reality, it could be said to be very unnatural for neither the princess nor the knight to not have fiancés. But in the end, it was just a novel.

"...Oh, it is already this late? I have to go now."

I unintentionally gazed at the elegant movements of Marianne as she smoothly got up without a sound. She, who had always been an existence opposite to mine in my previous lives, had become my friend now. When I observed her again after becoming more intimate, I understood how inferior I was to her. In front of her who, from her fingertips to the tips of her hairs, boasted the beauty of someone who was born in a noble family, from the depth of my hearts I felt embarrassed to have called her a rival.

"You know, Ilya-sama..."

About to pass beside me, Marianne suddenly stopped in her tracks.

“Even though I look like this, when I was a child I was a tomboy.”

She laughed in a dignified way and imagining this young lady as a tomboy was utterly impossible. When I looked up at her face with perplexity, she added as she gazed at my expression,

“When my fiancé was decided without me knowing about it, I threw a temper. I said that marrying someone whose face I didn’t even know was impossible.”

When I met him, I didn’t think I would love him, she continued with an unusual ridiculing smile.

“I also said quite a few very harsh things to him. I used the fact his house standing was lower than mine as a shield.”

However, said Marianne before shutting her mouth. Before long she heaved a deep sigh, a really unbelievable unladylike action for Marianne.

“I asked my mother about you, Ilya-sama.”

“About me?”

“Yes. You might not know, but my mother attended the tea parties organized by your mother several times.”

“...The tea parties...?”

“That is right. At that time, I happened to notice you.”

Nodding deeply, her gaze started to wander into the distance and she pursued,

“Becoming the fiancé of the son of the marquis is... a great burden... I also understood that very well. Because I’m a noble too.” After saying so, she bent over me and grasped my hands. Softly, gently, she wrapped them up with her own hands. When my hands moved in a flutter trying to refuse her gesture, she still refused to let go.

“My mother told me. That I mustn’t be complacent and rest on my laurels just because I had a fiancé. That in order to stand beside him, I must pull up a lot of efforts.”

So, I stopped averting my eyes from my fiancé. She said that as her strong gaze shoot through me. *And after that, I earnestly became his fiancé,* she concluded with a small smile.

“...Marianne-sama.”

Unable to stay silent I called out to her, but after that words wouldn’t follow. I didn’t know what to say. When I wasn’t aware of it, someone was looking at me. That fact simply made me lose my words.

“...How much efforts you have been exerting, in truth, I have no idea. However, this situation where your existence is being neglected and ignored, I cannot tolerate it.”

When I dropped my sigh on those white fingers that were grasping me strongly, suddenly I lost my strength.

“...If there is any thing I can do, please, do not refrain from asking me.”

Receiving that supplicating gaze, for a second, I almost stretched out my hand. But even if I relied on her, I knew I couldn’t change this huge flow of ineluctable events. If it had been the first time then... No, if it had been the second or third time... then there was no doubt I would have taken her hand and do my utmost efforts to make Soleil face me. Actually, I might also have taken actions to keep Silvia away.

But at the moment I decided to make Silvia attend the academy, I was expecting a future like this. A future where Soleil prioritizes Silvia over me, a future where Silvia gains a much healthier body than before. And also, a future that leads to a daily life at the academy where they get close together. Everything was as I anticipated. When I took into account all my previous lives, it wasn't difficult to make some prediction.

And despite everything, I still made that child go to the academy. It might be because I was still retaining some hope and I was betting on the one in a million chance that Soleil would prioritize me. In spite of all those negatives experiences, I was still hoping to hear him say one day that he would attach more importance to me than to that child. I let Silvia attend the academy and put a distance between Soleil and me, yet, I was still waiting for his hand. Truly, what a foolish person I was.

"..., No, Marianne-sama. I am alright."

It's alright. It's fine. A youthful voice echoed in my ears, telling me this. I have to continue believing that everything was alright. Otherwise, like one of my past me, I will hang a rope around my own neck.

However, I have already noticed. That even something like a place to escape to, I lost it long, long ago.

The voice that kept repeating "I am alright" was faintly trembling. Anyone hearing it would understand that those words couldn't be trusted. But Marianne only shook her head a little and did not say anything. Yet, her clear eyes became slightly blurred and she repeated the same words she had told me at the time Silvia had just enrolled in the academy, "Ilya-sama, you are truly very kind." So, this time, I didn't deny it clearly. In order to not make Silvia look like a bad person by mistake.

Silvia didn't do anything wrong. That child just fell in love with Soleil, she wasn't acting with the intention to rob him from me. I already decided to neither hate nor resent her. I may be jealous, I may be envious, but I won't deceive and harm her.

That child was my lovely, little sister. I tried to say that.

But, the words wouldn't come out of my lips, only a long sigh leaked out. My heart was about to be torn to pieces. My breath was about to stop, it was unbearable.

“Ilya-sama, a person cannot always maintain self-restrain. However, if it’s for the sake of someone who is important, I think that humans are creatures that can endure forever, for as much and as long it’s necessary.”

Reality was about to engulf me at any time. That’s why, to hide from that reality I concealed my breath and tightly closed my eyes. The time to wonder if I could do it well this time had already passed. I already had nothing left anymore.

.....Ilya-sama, for whom are you doing all this?

Marianne’s voice faintly blurred out and disappeared.

Chapter 22

If this is the real end (5)

Let's say there was a painting and a jewel. Then, the painting would be hung out in the most conspicuous place in the mansion, and the jewel would be hidden in the drawer of a dresser. These two items whose fate could be described as quite contrasted, were given to us sisters by our father. In terms of beauty, the object I received didn't lose. But, there was a heavenly difference in their values. A painting drawn by an amateur, and a rare jewel that didn't have another match in this world. While its rarity meant a price couldn't be put on it, the emotions invested into it were certainly not equal. From a third party's perspective, I, who received the jewel, might have seemed more fortunate. But that wasn't the case. That's why I hid the squarely box which contained that gem in the top drawer of my dresser. It wasn't an object I had desired myself. I didn't want it. Such a thing.



Staring fixedly at the necklace adorning my chest, Silvia said "Nice for you, big sister." To her who pouted her lips in a truly envious expression, I returned a wry smile. I simply didn't know what to say.

"Are you dissatisfied with my painting?" gently said father who was standing beside Silvia, listening to her voice while combing her thin hairs with his fingers. Enjoying the sensation of gliding his fingers in these smooth hairs, he repeated that gesture many times. Not displaying a special reaction to that father, Silvia accepted his gesture as natural. A daughter approaching marriageable age might tend to dislike having excessive skin ship with her father, but for my little sister it wasn't the case. I guess they had a harmonious relationship as family members. Outsiders would surely perceive it as such. And in reality too, that was the case.

.....But, only I was not included there. I had never been glued like this to father, as far as I remembered, him stroking my hairs never happened even once. From long ago father and I had been alienated.

"Even though I took great pains to paint it for your sake ah..." Facing father who said

this with a depressed attitude, Silvia became flustered and shook her head. “Ah, no, that’s not it...! I’m sorry father...” Their appearances as only the upper half of her body was lifted of the bed while she clung to father didn’t look like they were lovers, but still gave the strange feeling that you wouldn’t be surprised if told they were a couple. Despite the fact he was supposed to approach the latter half of his forties, the virile looks of my forever youthful father were famous to the point of being at the center of rumors even in the noble society full of good-looking individuals. Seeing the flustered state Silvia was in, father looked over her with affection and shrugged his shoulders with exaggeration. “Hehe, well, it can’t be help that you said that. Because it’s true that the stone I gave to Ilya was expensive.”

His line of sight drifted in my direction when he said my name, but our eyes didn’t meet. Since Silvia had mentioned me, he reluctantly turned his face toward me but it didn’t have any meaning. The profile of father who retracted his gaze back to my little sister eloquently showed how tremendously he loved Silvia. I, who was watching this from a little distance away, was forced to take on the role of a spectator like I was looking at the stage from the sidelines. I wasn’t a character of this story. I wasn’t a supporting character, neither an onlooker. Just a reader. I looked at the two of them cuddling together with this feeling.

“...But, big sister, your necklace is really beautiful. It’s the same color as your eyes.”

Even if we were only a third rank earl family, the estate still boasted of a certain broadness so my little sister’s room was certainly not narrow at all. Because I was standing quite some distance away from the bed, we couldn’t communicate with each other unless we raised our voices. However, I had already received the education of a lady. It was impossible for me to do such an improper thing. Especially in front of father. But for some reason, the charming and lively voice of my little sister didn’t sound like it was loud. I wonder if the soft wind coming from the slightly opened window in order to refresh the air was carrying her voice. Carrying it from the other side of that canopy which I could never approach.

I could see the appearance of my spoiled little sister as her upper body was leaning on father who was sitting on the bed. As Silvia kept repeating “How nice,” father kindly admonished her, “It’s something I gave to Ilya as a commemoration for her debut in the high society you know.” We weren’t at a ball right now, and although it was a bit laughable to wear such a magnificent pendant pared with plain casual clothes, but

because Silvia had said she wanted to see it, I had to grant her wish. When I opened the box, she said that just looking at it was not good, and I couldn't ignore the sulking expression of my cute little sister as she protested, "Big sister, if you aren't wearing it it's meaningless."

The day I made my debut in the upper society, she was bedridden and her wish to see the necklace couldn't be fulfilled. That was probably why she said that. "The debut in high society? Then it'll be my turn this year!" Father looked over Silvia whose cheeks were dyed in happiness with a gaze mixed with both affection and pity. Silvia didn't seem to have noticed, but whether or not she would make her debut was uncertain. As she spent most of her days sleeping, she didn't have the time to receive the education of a lady, and above all her study couldn't catch up. It would be extremely dreadful for a pure and ignorant child to enter a world where everyone competed to surpass others.

Although she was still a teenager, because she carried the name of our earl house, carelessness will hardly be tolerated when our home will host a party. Besides, that child was already overly excited just thinking about going to a ball. On the actual day, there was a high possibility she would come up with a fever. The memory on how she was allowed to enter the academy but on the appointed day she had to stay in bed was still fresh. Seeing father's reaction, I felt that my thinking was right on point. However, it would be foolish to expressively tell everything to her and make my little sister sad. Because I understood how much father doted on Silvia and loved her.

Certainly, the jewel that decorated my neck was gorgeous and shiny, but it was not fitting for the plain me. A lot of parents would buy that kind of things for their beloved daughters as they would make their debut. Above all if you were an aristocrat who valued his pride, it would be natural to prepare the top-quality products to not embarrass your daughter. Of course, it was also the case for this house. But I knew it wasn't offered out of love. The elaborate golden craftsmanship showed it was a high quality good, and the pea-green jewel arranged at the middle of the pendant highlighted how befitting and worthy of a noble this necklace was. If its owner hadn't been me, this item would have been plenty enough to adorn a noblewoman. I understood why Silvia was envious of it. Rarely allowed to leave her room, my little sister admired the princesses in fairy tales. It was inevitable that she would harbor respect, awe and longing toward noble daughters. That was why she wanted objects a girl from a noble family would wear. However, ultimately, I thought it was only because she didn't know about the circumstances surrounding those gifts.

“Let’s order one jewel the same color as these eyes.”

One day, suddenly, after having been called to father’s study, I was told this before even hearing what it was about. Neither did he explain why he had called me when we hadn’t faced each other for a while. He just said those words to the merchant who had been here before I arrived. The merchant who received the order respectfully agreed and like he was performing a magic trick, he took a paper from his breast pocket and quickly drew the picture of a necklace. Then, with an expression akin to licking his lips, he asked, “would this be satisfactory?”

For a second, father who had surely noticed his reaction made a displeased expression but that was all. It may be the usual exchange for them. The merchant explained how much value the good had with great loquacity, lifting the corner of his lips as he said how this necklace was more than fitting for a young girl. Father never showed any interest and merely nodded once, leaving the room after saying to hand over the bill to the steward. He never looked once in my direction, going away without granting me the permission to withdraw.

The merchant looked at the left-behind-me with a troubled face. He asked me if I had any requirement or wish for the necklace with a kind of pitying expression. I understood he was feeling sympathy for me. I was a pathetic girl whose father wouldn’t even look at her, only given her jewels. He was surely a merchant who was dealing with several famous houses. I didn’t know what he thought, but maybe this scene was one he had never seen in the other families. He probably had never come across a father who bought jewels only out of compulsory obligation. It was only done so that I wouldn’t disgrace our third ranked earl house when I make my debut. So that we won’t look like a family who couldn’t afford to buy some precious stones and be looked down by the others.

“But, father’s painting is even lovelier than the necklace!”

Silvia’s voice flew to my ear as I casted down my eyes and the pendant came into my line of sight whether I wanted or not. More than her words, it’s her innocent laugh that made my mood sink. Put down beside the bed, the portrait of Silvia painted by father was truly well-made. Many colors had been placed on the big canvas. It expressed well the ephemeral beauty of Silvia. At the same time, it made you feel an overflowing

affection. It had the charm to attract the heart of anyone seeing it. That painting let you understand it had been drawn very carefully over time.

The one who had painted it was none other than father. The same year he gave me the necklace, he also offered that painting. "Hey, big sister. You think so too, right?" When I was abruptly brought back to the discussion and tilted my head in wonder, Silvia made a pouting expression. *Please, listen properly to the conversation*, she protested as she pretended to sulk. "Also, why did you come here today?" I couldn't help but feel embarrassed being asked this question after all this time.

Contact with Silvia who was in bad physical condition should be kept to the minimum. That was the promise I made to mother a long, long time ago. Therefore, taking a distance from Silvia who was still in poor health until a few days ago and had yet to return to a normal state was natural for me. However, Silvia said with a saddened expression, "Even if you don't stand that far away, you won't catch my disease you know." It seemed she didn't know about mother's orders.

Then, wanted to comfort her, father didn't hide the blame carried in his eyes when he turned them toward me. Even though he should have known everything, he didn't seem to intent to cover up for me. Just saying, "your mother has order her not to do that" would have been enough, yet he didn't say it. As Silvia never blamed mother it would be very unlikely for her to protest, but in the one in a million chance she would, I supposed he decided to hide the fact his wife had prohibited me from getting closer. I heard the distant voice of father as he whispered softly, "what a cruel older sister."

I thought it was a very harsh remark, but I understood that no matter what I did it would be useless. That was because this house was revolving around Silvia. Because father, the head of the family, did so and his spouse, mother, was the same, the servants have also learnt to act like this. Because Silvia's health was poor, because Silvia's physical condition was weak, because Silvia was pitiable, because Silvia was lonely, because Silvia was, Silvia was..... I wonder, until when was it again that I was saddened by this?

The sole exception was only me. Only me could give priority to myself. While each and everyone, including the servants, were busy worrying about Silvia, I was sitting at my desk, holding onto a pen. Only I, the future marquise, was allowed to do that. Even my parents never took this future for granted like it was the natural course of events. At dinner, mother would smile and tell me, "*Since you'll be fine even if we leave you by yourself, I can rest assured*," while father ignored me, keeping quiet. When I was young,

I thought this was proof that I was being trusted. But it was certainly not. When was it that I understood I was merely being neglected? It wasn't that I was being praised for managing well even if I was alone, nor was I being told that I would be fine even if I were to only be by myself. *Since even if you are left alone, it's fine, I don't have to care*, was what was asserted as she averted her eyes from me.

It's not like I was coerced into it. It's not like I was told to work hard by myself. However, leaving this unsaid was an unfair manner of speaking. So I returned a lady-like smile. A perfect armor for the sake of not showing any emotion. I thought it was the best reaction to take to face those nobles. Then, I gripped my pen once again and headed for my desk.

I knew that this alone could support me. Only knowledge, wisdom and education would shape me. That's why I had to work much more harder. No matter how many times I repeat my life, only this was always the same.



Since it was decided I would be the fiancé of the marquis' heir and I was introduced to Soleil, most of my time was spent studying for that sake. Originally my qualifications weren't good enough. After all my memory was average and I wasn't very sociable. As much as possible I devoted myself to studying. Secluding myself in the archives of the mansion, from morning to evening I hold my pen and wrote.

Since the marquis house would have to interact with foreign countries, I thought it would be better to remember as many foreign languages as possible, and it was also necessary to know about the world history accordingly. Because I was hoping that such trivial details could become advantageous in diplomacy. Sometimes I studied with a teacher, sometimes by myself. I just single-mindedly poured all my efforts to not become a fiancé that would embarrass Soleil.

Several books were piled up on the desk. I thought they would become my strength. In that silent room, only the sound of the pen gliding across paper echoed. The black tea prepared for a break has already cooled down, but the maids never came here. From time to time, Al would check on my condition but he didn't speak and just left. He was probably worried about breaking my concentration.

Because I had sat down on the same chair for who knows how many hours, my lower back hurt. At the time I stretched out and heaved a breath, the silence was cut off by a

faint laughter. There was only me in the archive, so naturally, it didn't come from inside this room. Lured by the high-pitched voice peculiar to a young girl that resounded once again, I turned my eyes toward the window. The sunlight shining on the red carpet of the archives was dazzling. My eyes spontaneously scrutinized the scene behind them. I could see the figures of Silvia and her maids. They were walking on the sunny lawn as if bouncing on it. The maids were hurrying after the silhouette laughing in a happy voice seemingly about to start running at any moment. It was a nonchalant scene of a nonchalant ordinary day. A scene neither special nor unusual. The only thing different was the persons walking behind them, the master of our house, father. And my mother who was walking further behind.

I tilted my head, wondering if today was a special day, and from above I overlooked the figures of my parents and little sister walking in our wide garden, backed in the sunshine. From the archives located on the second floor, I could really see them well. I genuinely thought it looked fun, and I reflected on myself who was lurking in the shadows to avoid the sunlight. My dark colored dress seemed kind of ominous. The dress of my little sister fluttering in the wind was of a light color, it looked like it was capturing all the sunlight. Although because of her fragility there were a lot of times she wasn't allowed to leave her room, a bright place suited her well.

Eventually, my seemingly-getting-along-well parents and little sister stopped in one place and lunch was unwrapped before them. The well-organized maids had already brought a table from the mansion. When my fingers followed their silhouettes across the glass of the window, it felt like I could touch this happy and harmonious family, but it was somewhat painful. These archives were the place I belong to, it was my job to drive knowledge into my head here. No one said anything about this, and because mother was making an unusually satisfied expression, I thought it was fine. Even now that feeling remained unshaken. But speaking of interacting with my parents, it only happened during dinner time. I didn't even have a memory of having one conversation with father.

I really wanted to hear his opinion on questions related to the territory management but when I asked the servant to tell him I wanted to ask for his instruction, my meeting request was rejected in one word, saying he was busy. With a hint of sarcasm, I was told there was no free time, not even a few minutes to spare for me.

That person was looking at Silvia with a smile, standing in front of a canvas placed in the garden. From where I stood, I could see father drawing a picture, and I understood my little sister was his model. Was it mother's role to ascertain that? She was standing

at a little distance from this two, watching over them. Sometimes laughter was mixed in their conversation, and its echoes were thoroughly delivered to the place I stood. I was so far apart from them, and yet I heard it, how strange that was.

A peaceful day. A day lively passed with family. And I who was looking at it from a distant place. Incidentally, my line of sight fell on the books of foreign language piled up on the desk. I have to open them right now and learn the words. Otherwise, I will lose to the other young ladies of my generation. Like this, I don't think now is the time to look at the figures of my parents and my little sister.

But, but. My gaze refused to peel off them, in order to break it off, I took a step back. Immediately my strength left me. I couldn't support the weight of my body. My right hand that I extended promptly brushed off the pile of books. *Oh no*, just as I thought that, the books collapsed and at the same time the ink bottle fell over. The deep blue liquid spread on the desk, drops of it felling from its corner one after the other, mercilessly staining the books on the floor. Confused by the sudden incident, reflexively, I reached out to catch the drops and stop the flow of the ink. From my fingertips to my wrist everything was dyed dark blue, and while I didn't know what it represented, I thought that the real me might be dirtied all over like this.

In my repeating lives, I did everything in order to protect me. Even when I fell as low as becoming a prostitute, I kept my life by submitting my body. In order to accumulate as many "today" as possible. That was my objective, and this and only this became my life. When I thought so, I irremediably wanted to cry, but when the urge to cry arose I strongly shut down my eyes. My clenched teeth made a disagreeable sound. Even so, I didn't want to loosen my lips. Because it seemed like if I were to relax my strength even the slightest bit, sobbing would leak out. I kept blinking over and over, waiting for my tears to scatter. With both hands dyed black, I held on my heart atop my clothes.

.....On the day I made my social debut, the one who escorted me to do the courtesy calls was Soleil. He looked at the pendant decorating my neck and said it was a magnificent jewel. After praising the dressed up me, saying I was "beautiful" in a tone devoid of any emotion, he continued with another comment, *Your father's love for you can be seen through it*. He had been right. As there was no other stones semblable to the big gem that was the same color as my eyes, the color of dead leaves, it fetched a high price for its rarity. It wasn't wrong to say it was magnificent. It was also not wrong to say father's love could be seen through it.

It clearly showed how especially not loved I was.

But at that time, it was alright. Because after all, Soleil was here. Because he was holding my hand, supporting my body when I seemed to be about to fall because of my brand-new shoes I wasn't used to. His cold, freezing gaze even appeared lovely to me. Just the thought that one day, this man would become my husband was enough to fill my heart with satisfaction. Probably no one else would understand. Understand my craving for other's warmth because mother wouldn't embrace me. Understand my feeling that an ordinary painting made by an amateur, something that shouldn't have any value, was more beautiful and precious than any gem. How miserable had have been, living while telling myself that it wasn't like I wasn't loved. That was why I unconditionally loved the man who would become my husband.

".....Have you ever tried to think why you aren't loved?"

In one of my lives, there had been a person who told me this in that place. When the sunlight felt on the pitch-black robe, I noticed it had just a little bit of a tinge of blue. Even though it was a disturbing conversation, those black eyes were completely calm.

"Just as there is no reason for loving someone, have you never thought there might be no reason for not being loved?"

Even if I thought his porcelain face didn't look human, I also thought it was affixed with a somehow grieving expression. That being said, he didn't seem to be acting. I simply knew those eyes, those eyes that seemed to be doubting everything and anything in the world. I was sitting down at the desk, holding my pen like usual, but I couldn't write down a single thing in the notebook. Crow who had dropped his line of sight on that hand laughed once again.

"Why"

The question echoed in the archives as the laughter from outside could still be faintly heard.

“Why, has Crow...”

My voice trembled greatly. The pounding of my heart relentlessly grew inside my ears.

“...If there is no reason to love, then what you are doing may be meaningless.”

Beyond my hazy field of vision, I could see a white face awkwardly smiling at me. That Crow would have such a human expression so unlike him made me laughed. Seeing me like this, Crow answered while directing his gaze toward the window, “Even I laugh.” I told him that I knew it was meaningless, but maybe because he didn’t hear my murmuring voice there was no answer.....

“Why, here,”

My fingertips were cold. The me and the Crow inside my memory had certainly exchanged those words in the archives. But, until now, I hadn’t remembered it. No, rather than that..... I didn’t even have the memory of it.

In the past, I was a person who never forget anything. For that reason, I thought I could never cast aside my love. But as my lives piled up my memory became cloudy. There were things I could recall and things I couldn’t do so anymore. It was surely like this.

.....There might be something, something very important, that I have forgotten.

Chapter 23

If this is the real end (6)

“My lady...! What happened?”

The one who discovered me sitting down covered in ink was an old maid. Even though usually no one would enter the archives, it seemed she had come on some whim. As she entered, she was simply saying “It will soon be time to take a rest...” but when she saw me, she swallowed her breath and exclaimed in a loud voice, “Oh God...!” Then, in a panic, she turned heels and locked the door. As long as my parents were outdoor, there were no other person that could enter or exit the archives. But on the unlikely event someone would open the door, she was probably worried they would catch a glance of my unsightly appearance. Certainly, it was not a good thing to let the servant see me now. Because needless inquiries would be made to discover why I ended up like this. As the youngest servants’ loyalty was little, they had a loose tongue. End even those who have served for a longer time had moment of carelessness where they could let something slip. If that were to happen, in the blink of an eye bad rumors about me would spread. This situation of having stained your body by the spilled ink wouldn’t happen even to a young child. Because if you were an aristocrat, someone would always be by your side since your early childhood. If a situation such as spilling ink and dirtying your body occurred, it would be because of the blunder of the nearby person and not of the noble himself. That was what it meant to be born a noble. Being under the patronage of someone was natural, being protected, cherished, and served by others weren’t anything special. It was commonplace, a natural thing.

“Al is...?”

When I asked the question that floated in my mind, she answered with an apologetic expression, “...Alfred-sama has leaved the manor on an errand.”

.....I messed up.

In such circumstances, it wasn’t preferable to call someone from the opposite sex. I

have to show the proper reaction. I have to take the suitable attitude as a noble. Having reconsidered my thoughts, I shook my head.

“No, that is not what I mean... I am glad it was you.”

I am glad it was you who came, when I said that, the maid lowered her eyebrows and showed a small smile. She probably didn't know what kind of expression to make.

I was all alone in that place. Even though I was a noble's daughter, my figure smeared in ink offered a miserable sight. If there had been a person wanting to defame me here... they would probably be pointing their fingers at me while laughing.

“Is there anything to wipe with...” Extending a hand to me who was still sitting on the floor, the maid helped me up without caring about dirtying herself, then her eyes glided across the room. “No, it's alright.” When I declared so as I staggered on my feet, I met eyes with her anxious brown eyes. “...My lady, your face is ghastly pale. Are you feeling unwell?” My back was gently stroked with sympathy. It made me feel like my wavering and swaying heart was sinking even more. She had been serving our house for a long time. In fact, she was the maid who had been entrusted with taking care of Silvia. At first, Silvia's wet nurse was supposed to carry that duty. But her physical condition deteriorated and she went back to her home town. Therefore, because of her long years of service she was chosen as a substitute among the several employed maids. My parents had that much trust in her, and nowadays she was completely serving as Silvia's attached maid.

But she was originally my exclusive maid.

One day, mother selected her out of many candidates to employ her as a first-rate maid for me who was to become the spouse of a marquis. So, she stayed with me since the day I became Soleil's fiancé. But despite this, there was no mention of anything. At some point, I didn't even remember when exactly, little by little, she distanced herself from me. Father or mother might have issued the instruction to do so. I didn't know what the reason was, nor did I feel like asking. Because at this point I knew it would be futile.

But when I noticed it, I received a considerable shock. When I took a break from my studies and rose my head, the maid who should always have been by my side wasn't

here. Thinking she had some kind of business to do, I didn't pay it any mind, but she didn't come back like usual. After spending several days like this, as expected I couldn't continue to ignore that situation anymore, and I went to look for her. The fact I didn't ask anyone about her whereabouts was due to my conceit for being her master. Since I, the master, didn't know where she was, how come someone else could know?... That was the thoughts I had. Shortly after, I realized it was just a misunderstanding. I was reunited with her in the corridor just as she was exiting Silvia's room. The maid revealed a guilty expression just for a moment before covering it up with a smile. *"Have you come to see Silvia-sama? Right now, Silvia-sama is resting,"* she said. She told me this in an extremely natural tone. That's why I understood that she was no longer mine. Unable to accept it, when I casually appealed to mother, I was gently admonished, *"If you are concerned for Silvia, then you should draw back, don't you think so?" Because we'll hire another maid for you.* She was neither angry nor trying to reason me, rather she warned me like how someone would persuade a little child. Her gaze was looking at me as if I was a hopeless, foolish child. She took it as if I was stirring troubles, behaving selfishly to prevent my maid from being taken from me. *Silvia is also important for you, right?* She threw at me a question that didn't allow anything but an affirmative answer. There was nothing I could say back.

Even though in these repeating lives of mine, several discrepancies are born, at the point in time Silvia and Soleil meet, I have already lost her.

"Considering the situation, it is probably preferable to prepare a hot bath. While I apology for the inconvenience, but can you fill the bathtub with hot water please?"

I lightly wiped my hands with the cloth I brought to clean the dust from the book collection. Unable to see this and let it pass, the maid exclaimed with criticisms hidden in her voice, "Lady! You mustn't clean your hand with such a cloth...!" *It's alright, it's fine,* I answered blandly, tidying up my skirt and wiping away the ink. A drop of ink that had yet to dry made a new stain on the floor. "I apologize for dirtying this place. Cleaning everything is hard, isn't it?" When I said that with a bitter smile, the maid creased her eyebrows. "There is no need for my lady to apologize... Absolutely none." It was unusual for that everlasting calmed maid to lose her composure. Being told off in a slightly strengthened tone made a strained laughed escaped from my mouth. My conduct was probably flagrant to that extent. It wasn't like I did it on purpose. But I couldn't help it because for some reason the image of the polished floor remained imprinted in my eyes.

I mustn't do anything that would inconvenience the servant, I must never take that attitude in front of a maid. I wasn't that kind of person and I mustn't become such a woman. I must always be calmed, never lose my temper, and always wear a smile. "Apart from that... I wish we had something to wipe with but..." The dust cloth I had with me had already been dyed deep blue. But the maid shook her head a little and whispered, "...That's not the point, that's not what matters." I really didn't know what the maid who had lowered her head and was biting on the corner of her mouth was thinking. "...What happened?" When I asked her, she suddenly rose her head and strongly stated "Please, accept my deepest apologize. I will go prepare a hot bath." For some reason her shoulders fell down and she had a depressed look. "Please, wait here for a little while, my lady," she said that but I couldn't bring myself to let her go in that state. "...Merge." Reflexively, I called her out and she stopped. The maid who turned back with her shoulders trembling in surprise, opened her eyes wide like she had seen something unbelievable. "?" I tilted my head wondering what on earth happened to her, but then she muttered, "You remembered it." "I remembered what?" Shaking her head like she was trying to get ride of her bewilderment, Merge took several steps back and smiled. "No, it is nothing," she replied as if truly, nothing had happened.

"...Do not try to dodge the question, Merge."

I might not have paid any mind to her reaction if I had been in my usual state. Or if it had been the first me. I would have believed her words. But, I knew that when she had said there was nothing, it meant there was something. If it was really nothing, then there would have been not need to expressly say those words. We stared at each other for a little while, but before long Merge let out a small sigh and explained, "About my name, I thought that you had already..." Her last words were left unsaid, probably because she noticed it was out of bounds for a mere maid to say that. No servants would ask their master if he or she remembered their name. They shouldn't mind such a detail, it was the right and liberty of the master whether to remember or not. That was how the master-servant relationship worked.

However, it wasn't like the time spent together with her was so little and insignificant. At the beginning I learnt a lot of things under her constant attendance. Because around the time when it was decided I would become Soleil's fiancé, I was too young. I truly didn't know anything, couldn't do anything. The one who taught me than even when I was simply sitting on a chair, I had to stay sharp and careful was none other than this maid. "Remembering it, isn't it natural?"

My voice that should have answered without letting any emotion shown in it strangely sounded a little cold. I couldn't stop a self-mocking smile to appear as I discovered I hadn't been trusted so far. Did she think I wouldn't recall her even her name? Did she stay at my side while thinking so all that time? If that was the case, then it wasn't father's and mother's fault if she went to serve under Silvia. She had surely given up herself. I could understand that much.

If I had to place the responsibility on someone, then as expected, it would be my fault.

"...Lady,"

She called me with a slightly shaking voice.

"You were really good to me. That's why I am really grateful," I told her.

Thank you, I added and laughed, my lips drawn in their never changing arc. It felt like my eyes, nose and mouth were drawn with ink on a paper that has been stuck to my face. It was a lot thinner than a mask. But also a lot more suffocating. Experiencing this all too familiar feeling, I deepened my smile. Merge who was staring at my expression widened her eyes for a second, but the next one she lowered her head without saying anything. Then she left the archives in a trot like she was fleeing. No doubts there must have been something she had wanted to say. But in the end, she didn't. It made me realized how empty and vain this so-called relation of mutual trust was.

.....Now and even in the past too, I often saw her accompanying Silvia in her stroll.

As Silvia wasn't properly receiving a lady education, the master-servant barrier didn't exist between them. It felt more like they were spending time together as friends. They seemed to laugh and discuss a lot.

"If the maid was a spy... then what do you intend to do?"

When I was still a young child, Merge said this to me. At that time precisely, there had been a maid I was closed to. She was an exceedingly rare existence, someone who

would friendly accost even someone like me, a child who always kept her distance with all the servants employed in the estate. It could also be said that because she was still young, she had yet to completely understand the rules of the master-servant relationship. However, because of her friendliness, I told her a lot of things about the feelings I had built-up. Like what books I just read, what I learnt from my private tutor, even up to the content of the dream I saw.

She was a good listener, and she was also good at getting information out of me. I, who never had a friend of the same age, told her about what kind of rooms there were in the mansion proudly. Because she would be delighted when I did so. Because she would make a happy expression. Seeing me act like this, Merge tried to offer me an honest advice. *“Even if she isn’t a spy, what if there is such a person among her friends, her family or her relatives?”* Her words that only showed doubts stuck to my mind. I listened quietly as she told me I had to comprehend and deal with them by myself. Even though she didn’t teach me the answer, I understood properly. She was saying I mustn’t be too intimate with the maid.

It was only a few days after receiving Merge’s pointing that I learn that maid had resigned her job and left the mansion.

Saying that I wasn’t sad would be a lie. After seeing her off, I cried in my room. I did it secretly as to not let anyone find out. I cried holding my voice down. I didn’t want anyone to know I had been hurt by her departure.

Whether this maid had truly been an ill-intended person or not, I never knew. However, I remembered how she had told me, *“Lady, please, cheer up,”* when I was about to cry. She had say she had a little brother quite apart in age from her. He had been suffering from an illness since many years ago and couldn’t even stand up so they needed a lot of money. She had frankly narrated her life story. I didn’t know if it was true or not, but that person who smiled bitterly and said, *“My lady and myself might be quite alike,”* brought me a feeling of relief. Even though I had a family, even though I wasn’t all alone in the world, I never could get rid of a sense of isolation and loneliness. That there was a person that would understand this saved me to some extent. Even if that had been a lie. But in the end, what was important here wasn’t if she was an honest person or a liar.

It was how our surroundings would perceive it.

Even if she was telling the truth, even if she was worth of trust. That had nothing to

do. The problem was that she hadn't work enough to gain the trust of the surrounding people. If she hadn't been a maid or a newly hired servant, the circumstances might have been different. But, it hadn't been the case.



About half an hour later, I was given a towel by another maid who had come to inform me the bath was ready. I couldn't wipe away the ink that had already dried so I wrapped it around me and covered my whole body. Then I quickly moved to the bathroom so as to not been seen by other people. Although I hadn't done anything requiring a considerable amount of efforts, I was exhausted. Unexpectedly, worrying about things used a lot of strength.

While I was still absentmindedly lost in my thoughts, the maid helped me removed my stained clothes. Although it was a casual attire, the way clothes for nobility were fastened was complex and taking them off alone would consume a lot of time. I quickly undressed and entered the bathroom but then I stopped the maid who intended to follow me to help me bath. The room itself was wide, but the bathtub was barely big enough to allow to people to go in at the same time. It was overflowing with hot water. After pouring some on my body to lightly wash it off, I put the tips of my toes in the bathtub. It wasn't too hot nor too lukewarm. The water was just at the perfect temperature. I submerged myself up to my shoulders. The water seemed slightly murky, probably because of the ink that had remained on a place I couldn't see.

Somehow, I was feeling really tired. When I sank until the water reached my mouth, droplets fell from the ceiling. As I absentmindedly gazed at the fallen droplets float in the bathtub, they continued to fall and enter my field of vision one after the other. It almost looked like rain drops. Each time I blinked, I felt that the amount of falling droplets increased. The water drops that rebounded on the surface of the water jumped into my faintly opened eyes. For some reason, that feeling was familiar. When I closed my eyes while twisting my head, trying to remember it, my right cheek slowly sank into the water. I was thinking I couldn't stay like this, yet the darkness cut me off reality.

pitter patter...

A scene rose at the other side of my consciousness. I saw my own arm stretched out. Because my palms were turn upward, my long nails were extended toward the sky... My nails were? Such a trivial detail was accompanied with a sense of discomfort. A

daughter of a noble doesn't have long nails. Because one of the taught subject was how to play musical instruments. Whether it was string, keyboard or even wind instruments, most needed the performer to cut their nails short to play them. From childhood I had been learning piano. Therefore, my nails had never been long. But, right now, at the tip of my gaze, the nails of my stretched-out hands were long. Rather, they haven't been trimmed. Here and there they were chipped, their forms were irregular and crooked.

After becoming aware of all these details, I noticed that my body almost couldn't move. In addition, my eyes too couldn't see well. Was my eyesight dropping, or was it physically hindered by something? It was probably both. As I kept blinking again and again, I realized I was rolling on the ground. The reason I couldn't see my surrounding well was because a quite strong rain was falling, and the street lights weren't lit. Big raindrops dashed and bounced on the bared ground not properly paved. The bouncing water hit my cheeks. I lay there impassively, waiting for time to pass as the strong rain nearly drown my whole body.

.....Ah, I'm, again... I'm dying again.

I couldn't remember clearly what had happened. I might have forgotten why I ended up rolling in this back alley but my memories from even long before that might also be cloudy. I wonder if I ended up like this because I was sick? Or was it because of an injury? Had I been assault by someone? Or, did I do this to myself? I didn't understand anything, but I knew it seemed to be too late now, I was about to die. Each time I closed my eyelids, the remaining time was decreasing. The drops of water falling on my lips mercilessly flew into my mouth so breathing was difficult and painful. But my tongue that stopped moving refused or couldn't spit them out.

I wonder how many times I've repeated my life? Even this was vague. I want to take it easy. I want to throw away this damaged body and go somewhere. And then, never come back here once again. Even thought that was what I thought... I will surely, again, return here, to this world.

"...Hel... p"

I said a word I didn't know how many times I had repeated. While I knew nobody would hear it, if God was here, I was praying it would reach them. I tightly shut my

eyes and waited for that moment.

“...It’s fine.”

The voice that echoed suddenly made my heart beat relentlessly. When I opened my heavy eyelids, I saw the tip of black shoes in front of me. For a second, I thought it was a woman because the clothes coiled around that person looked like a skirt. But the voice I heard definitely belonged to a man. Besides it was terribly familiar. What he was wearing wasn’t a skirt, but a black robe. I recognized it. The hem of the robe that was swaying just above the ground wasn’t getting wet despite the rain. There wasn’t any mud on the shoes that were barely visible. Since I had already lost my strength I couldn’t move my head and confirm his face. But I was already convinced. I thought it was a nostalgic voice. His single sentence “it’s fine” that got lost in the sound of rainfall was heartrending. Always, I’ve always been waiting for this. I’ve always been waiting for him to appear. For him to reveal himself only at the very last moment when I’m on my death, it was so... He looked down on my face as he slowly crouched down. Because his head was covered by a big hood I only saw his mouth. The pale color, the shape of his fine lips, I recalled the days I spent with him. When was it that I revealed my secret to him? When was it that I gave up on my life when it was denied, when it wasn’t accepted?

“...finally.”

I wonder which one of us whispered this. The sound of the rain that knocked on the ground drowned it out, the words that were supposed to follow after this vanished.

This body that I couldn’t move even the slightest bit, Crow hold it up in his arms. Then, he gently whispered something close to my ears. I didn’t know whether his words held meaning or not. Even though it was the first time we met in this life, I was surprised by how he was acting as if we were old friends. But anyway, there was no longer anything that could be done and it didn’t matter anymore.

There was something I wanted to tell him. Crow probably didn’t want to know though. Somehow, I really wanted to convey this to him.

“There was... a meaning.”

I thought my voice would no longer come out, yet my dry tongue spined out those words. For some reason, that voice echoed clearly.

“There has... been... a reason.”

...why I wasn't loved.

.....In one of my lives, at some point, Crow said, as there is no reason to love someone, isn't there also no reason to not love someone? If that was the case, then no matter what you do, wouldn't it be meaningless? If there was no reason, no meaning for not being loved, it was because there was no room to be loved.

But I knew. The reason why I wasn't loved. The reason why my parents never loved me and only loved Silvia. In reality, I knew why.

I opened my lips to tell him, but it seemed I didn't have any remaining energy left. I could only meaninglessly keep opening and closing them. As if to soothe my chest from which rose a painful whistling sound, Crow tenderly stroked my back. He gently calmed me, “It's fine now.” Abruptly I felt that I no longer cared about anything.

It's fine now, it's alright.

The repeated words resonated in my heart. It was what I wanted to hear. I always, wanted someone to. I wanted that to be said. I see, it's already fine. When I thought so, my consciousness quickly faded away.

The sound of the rain continued to echo in my ears.

I was.....

Chapter 24

If this is the real end (7)

I exhaled, and a big air bubble escaped my lips. It's painful, I can't breathe. As I thought that and opened my mouth wider, another bubbled rose up. My throat opened to inhale air. But my lungs didn't expand, instead I felt like throwing up as my lungs were pressured by a squeezing weight. Even though I wanted to cough, one bubble after another left my mouth and that choking sensation didn't change. Or I should rather say, I couldn't breathe.

A disagreeable burbling sound echoed as a bubble extended and covered my face. When I stretched out my arms in anguish, something coiled around my body shook greatly and went away. But it returned to its former position the next second and bound me. My hands reached out, my fingers broke through something and felt the air. A splashing sound echoed in the distance. At that moment I finally realized where I was.

I was sinking. I was submerged inside the water. In other words, I was drowning. I hadn't noticed until that moment because I had lost consciousness. I probably woke up abruptly because my body was warning me. It warned me that if things continued like this it will die. When I remembered I was taking a bath until a moment ago, then naturally, I understood I was in the bathtub.

I tried to straighten my posture with one hand and stretched out the other to support my body but it wasn't going well. The palm of the hand that should have used the bottom of the bathtub for support didn't stop slipping. Finally, one of my legs lost its footing and made a loud noise as it broke through the water surface. Following it, the other foot sank and made an even louder sound. As I kept struggling, my upper body remained completely submerged, and yet, I felt the pain going away. I thought that perhaps my consciousness was becoming hazy, but I had no way to confirm it. In the first place, I was inside the water, all the boundary lines around me were vague and fuzzy. Even the fact I was drowning, I wasn't sure if it was real or not.

".....!... dy!... La... dy!... Ah, lady.....!! My lady!!"

I could see someone's face beyond the blurry water surface. I couldn't make out their traits because of the blurriness, but from their figure it was probably a maid. Did she notice from the sounds, or did she come check the situation because I was taking too long? While repeatedly calling me out she was plunging her arms in the bathtub, trying to lift me up. But it was impossible for a woman alone to raise a person with a similar stature. My body further sank to the bottom of the water. I intended to swallow my breath in one gulp but a large quantity of water entered my throat. I felt my vision getting darker.

"...Someone! Someone!!"

The sound was muffled but I could hear the maid call for help. It seemed my ears were still working. Soon, several maids came, alarmed by the noise and I was finally rescued from the bathtub. Is what I like to say but it was only to the extent of extracting my upper body from the water. When I grabbed the arm of a maid while coughing violently, I noticed she was trembling. The maid looking at me with a face that had lost all its color was Merge. Her heartbroken gaze distorted by pain pierced my chest. While I kept coughing again and again, quite struggling to catch my breath, at the same time I was thinking with a cool head. I couldn't believe I made such a blunder.

Taking a bath by myself was not commendable, but drowning in the bathtub wouldn't simply end with turning it into a laughing matter. As I was no longer a child, all the responsibility lay with me. The daughter of a noble should borrow the help of maids to bath. At least, someone should have stayed in the bathroom. Because I was the next marquise. Protecting myself was an obligation imposed as a "duty." In other words, it meant I had to do my utmost to protect myself. I ought to have known this and yet..."...fu" Did I expire in order to escape from the pain, or was it to scorn my own idiocy? Even that, I no longer knew anymore.

Before long another maid in my back wrapped a towel around me. The towel was just fine to warm up the shoulders that had become cold, however, because almost half of it was sinking in the bathtub it was very heavy. Being unable to stand by myself left me stunned. From both sides of the bathtub, two maids tried to pull me but it didn't go well and my body that had been scooped up after great pains once again fell into the water. My body seemed to be complaining as if it had lost its bones and refused to listen to me. A sigh unintentionally leaked from my mouth and my lips half sank into

the water. At that moment.

Bang!

The door that should have been closed was flung opened and a man with golden hair rushed into the room. That his forehead was covered in sweat wasn't just my imagination.

"Alfred-sama!"

The one who rose her voice was Merge who was supporting my strengthless body. She increased the number of towels wrapped around me, trying to hide my body from Al's eyes. But he wasn't the last bit perturbed and walked to the middle of the room, pushing Merge aside. Not caring about her who once again screamed "Alfred-sama!", he scooped me up from the bathtub.

I was also fully aware that it wasn't a good thing to expose my skin to someone of the opposite gender even if he was my escort, but it was also true that I felt relieved. My feet had become swollen and dull, I couldn't feel any sensation from them.

"Why did you let her enter alone!" Moving his gaze to Merge, Al roared in a deep voice.

"...Tha-that's..." Merge who immediately start stumbling on her words wandered her eyes in the room.

"...It was me who said I wanted to bath alone."

Besides, Merge wasn't here a while ago. When I added this while suppressing a light cough, Al's lips tightened and he shook his head.

"I heard they were excellent maids, but it seems to not be the case," he suddenly said in a matter-of-fact tone. "I don't think an excellent maid would do all and everything her master orders from her." He sounded as if his voice didn't contain any warmth. But I understood he was wrapped in wrath.

“I am sorry, Al. It is my fault.” The maids who were on the receiving end of Al’s sharp glare were completely shriveling. So as much as possible, I tried to say that in bright tone instead of them who became completely unable to answer. But I couldn’t do it well and quivered on the last words. It was natural as I nearly died. Whether he was aware of this or not, Al flatly rejected my words with a voice devoid of emotion.

“There is no need for my lady to apologize.”

He easily held me up in his arms as if the struggling of the maids a while ago was a lie. Then, in a careful motion he carried me out. The maids who had a bad expression when Al, a person of the opposite sex, had entered the bathroom, watched him in silence, understanding the help of a man was necessary.

To begin with, I was in the bathroom adjacent to my room, so when we came out of the changing room we directly reached my bedroom. There was nobody here. Just when we were about to leave the bathroom, a maid had put a gown on me who was held in Al’s arms. She probably thought that a towel was not enough. Al gently put me down on the bed and withdrew after saying “I will come back later.” He gave me time to put on clothes.

I exhorted my body that had lost all its strength and when I rose up my upper body, the gown fell off. This time night clothes were handed over to me. I didn’t confirm who had given them and passed my arms through the sleeves. At that moment, a trembling voice say, “My lady, I deeply apologize...” Not looking at my face and keeping her head bowed very low, the person who spoke was Merge. Because she was the one with most seniority among the maids who happened to be present, she probably was apologizing on behalf of them all. “I said it before, but you don’t have to worry about it. Because it was me who said I wanted to be alone.” My vague consciousness was also returning. My fingers didn’t shake and I was able to speak clearly. This made me feel unbelievably relieved.

I didn’t die..... I was still alive.

“I am sorry.” While I said that in a light tone to prevent the atmosphere from becoming too heavy and awkward, I touched Merge’s shoulder. When I did that, she suddenly rose her head and said, “Please stop...!” Then, she escaped my hand and took two, three steps back. Although it was only just a small distance, that was enough to prevent us from touching each other. She was supposed to be close, and yet, for some reason I felt she was very far away.

The other maids had left when I wasn't aware of it and now only the two of us remained in the room. In the bedroom that had become deadly silent, her voice that had regained her calm echoed.

"...There is no need for an apology. Because it is me who failed my duty as a maid."

Seeing her like this, I understood she was really regretting. But my mind was dominated by the dream I saw when I was swallowing water inside the bathtub. The sensation of losing everything the moment I died. That shock. Even though I've experience it enough times to get tired of it, I still couldn't get used to it. It was so distressing, painful and sorrowful I couldn't help it. This couldn't be expressed with words. I wonder why that moment when you were on the verge of dying bestowed people so much agony? I prayed many times to at least be granted a gentle death. Every time I died I was always thinking about this.

While my thoughts wandered aimlessly, I muttered "But, I am the one at fault." Not only this time. Always, I'm always calling misfortune on myself. Even though I have lived so many lives, repeated everything so many times, even though I might have been offered an amendable life..... I cannot live well.

"Spilling ink, drowning in the bath... I am really beyond help."

I intended to say it as a self-depreciation but unexpectedly my voice came out in a grave intonation. The shoulders of Merge who had once again lowered her head swayed a little and she rose her face suddenly. Her hand strongly clutched her chest. As if it was painful. Her collar which was usually straightened was twisted and squashed by her palms.

"Merge?"

"Why, my lady why are you... so kind? It wouldn't have been strange to rebuke me for what I did. Rather than entrusting it to the other maids, I ought to have stayed at your side and yet...!"

Merge made an expression like she was about to cry at any moment, even though Al's condemnations earlier had been much fiercer. It was really rare for her who always kept her calm. The woman who spend time together with me when I was young always had calm eyes. Being alone together with her who was usually constantly attending to Silvia was a rare situation, I didn't know what to say to cheer her. If I spoke now my words would reflexively become, "You are Silvia's maid so you do not have to worry about this."

However, those words I planned to say stayed stuck in my throat and refused to come out. If I say them right now, they will definitely be taken as sarcasm. Because I understood this, no matter what, I mustn't say them. Even though she might have wanted me to blame her. I didn't want to say such words. Like how Marianne and Merge just now had described me, I wanted to become a tolerant person. Someone who can forgive everything, love everything, confer kindness to everyone.

I've always wanted to become that kind of person.



In the end, the sole words I managed to say to Merge who kept apologizing were "Thank you." With a smile on my face, I told her I was grateful for her consideration. I knew that by doing this, everything would be settled nicely. When you are in the middle of a conversation with someone, if you cannot understand your partner's intention, for the time being you could stop the discussion by giving them your thanks. If you do that, in most cases you will avoid settling an uncomfortable mood between you. However, despite my smile, I couldn't convince Merge.

Even though she was the one who taught me that when I was a child.

"At all time, you are a lady."

In other words, a lady ought to always wear a smile and carry herself properly, that should have been what she meant..... I was doing it properly, right? I instinctively swallowed back those words. Merge gazed at my face for a while, but then she sighed and deeply lowered her head. Then, keeping her head bowed like this, she left the room as if she was trying to break off from my line of sight. The brief moment before she turned her back from me, she clearly showed a hurt expression.

Wait, I was about to call out. *Do not go*, I almost said. That's right, the one who left the other behind wasn't me. The one who threw me away was Merge. And yet, for her to be making an expression like she was being abandoned, it was unfair.

I lied down on the bed, took a deep, deep breath and closed my eyes. I was the noble's daughter of a third ranked earl house, and the fiancé of Soleil, heir of a marquis family. So, I mustn't be shaken by such a thing. I must keep my composure. I mustn't let anyone sense my wavering heart. I mustn't be perturbed by anything, rather, I must boast of the strength to coerce my opponents. Because I had been raised to become such a person.

But, why. Why can't I suppress my sorrow?

"...I was reported that you drowned in the bath."

Merely a few minutes after Merge had left my room, my mother appeared. Mother was making a difficult expression, but more than looking worried she seemed to be brooding over something. I was about to get up but she told me to remain as I was, so I ended up looking up at her who had sat on the bed side. When I suddenly sensed a gaze on me and looked toward the corner of the room, I saw my escort knight there. I guess he entered with mother. Although he was frowning, he wasn't angry. Rather, he was probably anxious about me. Because we have been together for a long time, I completely understood how kind he was. In the past, I misread this feeling and ended up losing him.

"You are not feeling unwell, right?"

When I acquiesced to my mother inquiry, that person heaved a huge sigh and held down her forehead.

"...Mother?"

"Do not make me worry."

Seeing the sorrowful appearance of my muttering mother with her head lowered like this, somewhat my heart got warmer. Even though usually she didn't give a care about me, it seemed that she became worried this time. Knowing that cleared my heart. Just when I thought it was unscrupulous of me to have those thoughts and I was about to smile to her,

"Having to worry about only that child is enough."

I fully understood mother's words. The smile I was about to show was destroyed in an instant. Still, my lips somehow managed to form a gentle line. My teeth were colliding against each other as if I was trembling in the cold. I rose my face wondering if my unrest had been perceived, but mother was still making the same difficult expression. A thought crossed my mind. Maybe the words I heard earlier were just an auditory hallucination. But,

"It is troubling for me."

If even you are like this, it's troubling, were the words she spat out, the words that fell on me. A sigh was supposed to be lukewarm, and yet, why was it so terribly chilly? Those words glided over my cheeks, their sharpness slashing at my skin like they were cutting large pieces of ice. Even if I knew this was just an illusion, the corners of my lips distorted in pain. Even if this pain was an illusion, I understood the words that feel out of mother's lips were real. At once I wanted to cover my ears and tried to raise my arms to do so. But, my exhausted arms only moved a little bit before heavily sinking back on the sheets. They were heavy like lead. As if trying to resist, my fingertips moved but they could only meaninglessly dug my nails in the fabric.

"Silvia also said she wasn't feeling very well..."

When you think that child's condition has become better, the next moment she gets worse so you cannot be careless, she said as she lowered her eyebrows. It was somewhat

painful to see that expression of her, and when I blinked once, the scene I saw earlier in the archives spread out in front of my eyes. That child talking happily amidst the gentle sunlight. The figures of our parents chasing after her. I guess her condition worsen due to basking in the sun for a long time. Perhaps, even a gentle breeze that normally felt good might be very poisonous for Silvia. At that time, mother... At that time when she was in the middle of that idyllic painting of happiness, mother probably didn't care where *I* was. That mother who always has a grasp of Silvia's whereabouts at any times. For example, if Silvia's figure were to disappear from her room, there was no doubt it would become a major incident and the estate would be overturned. Mother would be extremely determined, she would become frantic. But when I disappeared it didn't become an uproar. That was the level of value my existence held in that mansion.

Because anyhow, I was only a good of the marquis on deposit here. That was what it meant to become Soleil's fiancé.

Mother told me sadly, "Because this child is really frail." I could only agree to that, "...Yes, indeed." My hoarse voice sounded awfully weak, but it seemed I was the only one who thought that. "Drowning in the bathroom... what happened to you?" I was hard pressed to answer this question. Her frowning face was clearly blaming me. *Though imperfect, you are somehow the fiancé of the marquis' eldest son.* She made her words very obvious to me. *Stop doing something as embarrassing as drowning in a dark bathroom.* Was what I heard her say. "You cannot act like a spoiled child anymore." I recalled the words of rejection bestowed to me by mother in my childhood.

I heaved a painful, very, very small sigh. I couldn't breath well, it felt like something was blocking my chest.

Even though I wasn't drowning in the water, it felt like I was thoroughly sinking. "My foot slipped" when I tried to laugh, I also tried to feel it was really funny. The sound resounded several times at the back of my throat. Like I was really laughing. With a little sigh, mother said, "You are a helpless child." Then, she slightly smiled wryly. We were facing each other, eyes to eyes, floating a smile on our faces, and yet, our hearts were drifting somewhere far away. However, I had probably shown mother the reaction she wanted from me. She didn't blame me for anything else.

Ah, I didn't make a mistake, feeling relieved I secretly stroke my chest in order to not let anyone notice.

“...Madam, it will be about time soon.”

The one who broke the silence that felt between mother and I was my escort who watched the course of the conversation from the corner of the room. He was surely concerned about me. The atmosphere floating between mother and I couldn't be described as calm. He couldn't not notice it. Mother swiftly turned her eyes away from me and showed a sweet-looking smile at Al, replying, “That's true.” Then, she slowly got up. From there on, she opened the door without turning back in my direction a single time. As if she couldn't imagine I was staring at her back. No, maybe... She didn't turn back precisely because she knew.

My clinging gaze was like one of a young child seeking her mother's warmth, it was irremediably pitiful and miserable.

“My lady, I deeply apologize.”

After mother left with the maid who had been waiting behind the door, Al who remained in the room suddenly lowered his head.

“...What are you apologizing for?”

It was only a genuine question, but it seemed it sounded differently for Al. To my inquiry, he repeated, “...I deeply apologize,” and lowered his head again.

“All of you, you are always apologizing. I wonder, are you thinking so poorly of me?”

A laughter escaped my mouth, but for some reason tears welled up as well. Al stared at my face without saying anything.

“Was it you who called mother?”

When I somewhat felt like asking this, Al shook his head and answered, “No.” “So, it was Merge.” A sigh was mixed with the conclusion I drew from his reply. “I should have stopped her,” squeezed out Al while swallowing his breath and pursing his lips. In other words, his previous apology had a meaning.

However, I could somewhat understand that Merge’s action came from her kindness. Merge probably had thought that since she was my mother, she would certainly help me. She was the person who employed the best maids for the sake of her daughter. A person who always did her best for her family. Mother was a wonderful person. Because, mother loved her family. Nobody can compare to that image of mother. It’s a “mother.” Just a mother. Nothing less, nothing more.

“From now on, you will be Soleil’s fiancé.”

“A happy future has been promised to you. Because you will become the wife of a marquis.”

“So, from today onward, you are no longer the daughter of the earl family, you are the fiancé of the marquis’s heir.”

When it was decided I would become Soleil’s fiancé, mother said this. It wasn’t like those words were said with indifference. Neither were they heartless. Mother wasn’t wrong. But...

“Al,”

“...Yes.”

“Al,”

“Yes.”

It was probably because he was in the bedroom of an unmarried woman, even if she was her master. Concerned by this, my escort stood at a distance, peeking at my expression as a bitter smile involuntary formed on his lips. It was the same as in my past life. Although my hand was extended toward him, we weren’t even connected.

When I said I wanted him to come here, he didn't go against my request.

"...My hand, can you hold it?"

My voice was ugly and distorted. My unreliable and trembling sigh made my vision sway. It seemed I was about to start crying uncontrollably at this scene that I remembered. It was the same one as in my previous lives. Again, we were facing each other like this, the same way we once did someday. Similar to that time, he stood a few steps away from the bed and won't grasp my hand. It's because we both understood that if he were to do this now, we wouldn't just be a master and her follower.

"No, it is nothing, I just wanted to try saying this."

"...Yes, I understand."

I cannot help but feel sad and pained. Even though I felt them countless times, I couldn't believe how those emotions were almost crushing me. I couldn't increase my tolerance to them, I was always hurt like this every time, the depth of the pain I had to bear was always the same. How comfortable would it become if I could throw away a thing like my heart?

If I could resign myself to not be loved by anyone. That way everything would proceed more smoothly.

"...Al, will you listen to my story?"

"Yes, naturally."

"It is a story about me, Silvia and... our parents."

.....*It's a story about me who was unrelated to love from the moment I was born.* When I said that, my heart constricted like it was assailed by an ominous feeling.

I wanted someone to listen. But, I didn't want anyone to listen. I wanted someone to

understand, but I didn't want anyone to understand. About my miserable life, about the life I lived while persuading myself I was surely loved. This thoughtless, I didn't say I wanted him to understand it.

There had only been one sole person who had wanted to understand. Because those black eyes always saw through everything.

"Silvia is a princess."

"Yes," acquiescing to what I said, he nodded deeply.

In the mansion, Silvia was indeed handled like this. By both my parents and the servants. She was that kind of existence, because she was treasured like the apple of their eyes, like a precious gem. However, the meaning of my words was different.

"No, Al. It is not a metaphor."

Silvia is, a genuine, "princess." And the protagonist of a story.

Al's eyes were full of surprise as they scrutinized my face. A tiny bit of uneasiness and fear were mixed in his gaze. Most humans would probably show the same reaction as him when they touched the truth which should not be known.

"And I am a genuine, supporting character from a story."

Chapter 25

If this is the real end (8)

In a story, there is always a theme. If we compare this strange life to a story, I wonder what would the theme be? And what kind of lesson was included in it?

“Al, do you know this book?”

When I showed him a book I quietly pulled out from under my pillow, Al dexterously rose one of his eyebrow and tilted his head. Maybe he thought it was a little unsatisfactory for a daughter of a noble family to read this neither thick nor thin book. However, its readability was probably one of the reason it became popular even among the members of the high society, regardless of their rank. As there weren't many characters, the human relationships weren't complicated. Only the love story between the princess of the neighboring country and a knight was developed.

“Of course, I know it but...”

What about it? Al glanced at the book I was holding while making an overly serious expression that showed his doubts. Because that book became a hot topic of conversation among nobles for a while, as the subordinate of an aristocrat, it wasn't strange for him to know it. We hadn't talked about it, but he probably had at least heard the title.

“Is something wrong with this book?”

Al who was standing too far away to reach the book took one step forward and looked at the novel I presented. He seemed to hesitate about whether or not it was alright for

him to receive it. His right hand hanged out in the air a short while before it returned to its original position without taking the book.

“I wonder if you have ever read this book, Al?”

When I asked him, as expected he shook his head to answer negatively. After I briefly told him the outline, he replied “Oh, it is that kind of story...” while nodding his head with an uninterested expression. Marianne had also been like this but it still became popular in the high society and people who showed the same reaction as Al were few.

“And so, what is so special about this book?”

The princess of the neighboring country and a mere knight, those two main characters who would normally never have been wedded to each other, transformed the story into a magnificent romance, it was a romantic tale whose contents were all over the place. Although those two characters were confronted with a harsh destiny, in this country there were many nobles who had never been wedded together due to the difference in social rank. If you picked them up one by one, you would surely find an even more dramatic story. That’s why Al couldn’t find any interest in the content of this novel. Rather, he seemed to be suspicious of the book itself, doubting if there wasn’t any trick to it. His blue eyes were zealously staring at the front and back covers. However, there was nothing special about that book. Nothing was different from the one you could usually purchase in general bookstores, it was a good that could be obtained the next day after requesting it from our usual supplier. Suffice to say, as a romance novel its cover was very plain.

“...This book you see, belongs to father.”

I tried to prevent my voice from trembling. But I didn’t think I did a good job at it. The words tinged with an unsettledness surpassing what I had imagined left a reverberation in the room that had fallen silent. Even though I intended to pretend to be calm, suddenly, my fingers lost their strength. The book fell on the carpet with a thud, its pages were turned even while there was no wind. As I was about to reflexively

move to pick it up, with his gaze Al held me back and did it himself with natural movements. I remained lying on the bed, simply staring at the book that fit in his palm. It was at that moment I noticed my own hands were shaking. I released the breath I had unintentionally hold up. My heart which should have calm down was slightly pounding. Was it really alright to continue like this and narrate the truth? Suddenly, I realized I was afraid and shut my mouth.

“It belongs to master?”

Al’s voice was tinged with doubts, probably because he knew that person wouldn’t give me something like this. In those repeating lives of mine, in this lifetime that wasn’t that long, the things father gave me were few. If I thought about it, the necklace I received the year of my social debut was the only item I could declare having received from father. As for other things..... such as the books needed for my education as a lady, the dress I wore when invited to another house, or the ornament handed over through mother, in the first place, I didn’t think father had been involved with them. Mother had delivered them personally, saying “Your father gifted them to you,” but the truth was probably different. She probably pitied me who never received anything and said this. And so, mother wouldn’t know what this romance novel was and father wouldn’t give it to me. Al also knew this. As my escort, he had noticed the unnaturalness of my swallow relation with father.

When I said in a low voice to the frowning Al, “I stole it,” he opened his eyes wide in an interesting reaction. Since his expression was so different from his usual face, I burst in laughter unintentionally, a disgraceful chuckle rising from the depth of my throat.

“...Lady...”

Seeing me react like this, I guess he thought I was teasing him. A hint of protest mixed in his voice, he peered into my eyes.

“...It is the truth you know.”

I really stole it, I repeated it again, lifting myself properly from the bed this time. Compared to earlier, I felt that most of my weariness had faded. Now that it was no longer the time to laugh and dodge the issue, Al silently swallowed his breath. Stealing one's own father's possessions was not something that should be done, the other families aside, in our house, it wasn't permitted. To say nothing of the fact the offender wasn't Silvia but me. If father were to learn of it, he would condemn me without allowing me any room to explain myself. No, maybe the word "condemn" was a bit too much. However, I would be abused with cold-heart words like "I don't remember raising such a daughter," and I would likely be locked up in my room. He would give me an inconspicuous punishment so that it wouldn't become known by outsiders. But if Silvia had been the offender, there was no doubt he would have laughed and forgive her, saying something like, "this helpless child, what will I do with you?" And it would stop at him gently rebuking her, "keep your pranks to a moderate level." Did he trust that child this much, or did he just simply suspect I was a harmful existence for this house? Although I imagined various possibilities such as this one, in the end, I knew nothing.

"Lady, can I hear your reasons for doing this?"

Not daring to approach the topic of me stealing things, Al looked at the book. He was pondering strongly with his head tilted on the side, probably because no matter where he looked there was no trace of the mechanism he had expected to find. Did he think of the possibility of hollowing out the contents to hide something precious inside? But very few people would use such a classic method. "There is no trick to it you know," when I repeated this once again with a smile, Al moved his line of sight to observe me instead. He seemed to be wanting an answer to his question.

"...reason, a reason you ask..."

However, I didn't have an answer when asked "why?" It could be said I had found this book by mere coincidence, or that I was lead to discover it by something. I felt that I had been driven by some circumstances and guided by a great force, and as a result, "I couldn't help but find it." Probably no one knew the answer. If someone did know, then it would only be the being called God.

“I am sorry Al. I cannot tell you. So, I would be happy if you do not ask me.”

As I shook my head in refusal, he narrowed his eyes that were like the color of a deep sea. This gesture was like trying to ascertain something far away.

“...No, it is also me who was too intrusive.”

I smiled wryly seeing my escort with his head lowered in a slightly depressed state. Perhaps he was truly perceiving that he “had been too intrusive.” The one in the wrong wasn’t Al, but I couldn’t tell him everything here and now. For that reason, I laughed and glossed over the issue, “It is fine, I am also sorry.” As usual, Al answered, “There is no need for my lady to apologize” with his gaze still lowered. He himself was surely quite sick of repeating this sentence, yet each time I would apologize, he kept saying those same words. He hasn’t changed since long ago. From long, long before, without any change, he tries to be my escort knight.

The first time I found this book was in one of my past lives; it truly happened by chance then. I, who had already been married to Soleil, was visiting my parents’ house to ask father advices about territory management. However, in spite of having made an appointment in advance, father was absent. When I asked the steward, he unapologetically explained that in order to help the feeble Silvia to recuperate, he, mother and Silvia and headed for a villa in the suburbs. After being asked if father didn’t know I was coming today, the steward laughed with an embarrassed expression that was saying he thought father knew. He lowered his head and added in a forced way that they had seemed to be in a hurry. In other words, I thing he wanted to explain there had been no time to contact me. I had to desperately gulp down the lump of heat that had welled up in the depth of my throat at that moment. Then, I conducted myself as if I was a broad-minded and very tolerant person and said, “If it is for Silvia’s sake then it cannot be help.” I persuaded myself I was no longer the young daughter of a noble. I warned myself that this was part of politics, part of my work. If it wasn’t an interaction between family members, then I won’t be hurt that much. I should think that a work agreement had been revoked. Therefore, it wasn’t that difficult to fabricate a smile. The steward who thought I would surely fly into a rage smiled and commented, “My lady has also become a magnanimous person.” I didn’t know if it was sarcasm or his true opinion, but I had enough composure to at least thank him. That was how much experience I had acquired. I wasn’t the me from the time I knew

nothing. I understood well what must be done in order to protect myself. I asserted myself forcibly and thought that despite the fact I could have predicted father's conduct, I had been negligent in confirming it.

After the steward left, I remained alone in the corridor, deep in thoughts as I heaved a sigh. Why did things always turn this way? In this corridor devoid of windows, there was nothing else but some flower vases, some wall-decorations and a gloomy silence. Even if you concentrated your sight on it, my shadow was almost invisible. The scenery wouldn't change even if it wasn't here. I gazed at the ceiling, thinking my life might be like this too. Hoping that a black bird might be lurking there, my line of sight glided over the luxurious candelabrams lined up at regular intervals.

And then, nearly unconsciously, I clutched the door knob of father's study.

It was an unexpected action for my usual self, but for some unknown reason I felt I had to do this. In fact, the door which should have been locked opened very easily. Until that moment I had thought that thick door should have been heavy, yet I remembered it felt light as a feather. I understood that if my trespassing in the study without father's permission was discovered, the problem wouldn't be settled with a simple apology. But as if another ego had sprouted by itself, my feet developed a will of their own and moved arbitrarily. Rather than feeling I was creeping in, it felt like I "simply entered inside" and I didn't feel any guilt. That shrewd father of mine, there was no way he would forget to lock his study. Therefore, regarding the fact it wasn't locked, it would make sense for it to only be an accidental incident. Perhaps I felt that the one to blame wasn't me but the servants.

It was at that time I got hold of this novel.

On the top right corner of a bookshelf taller than a person. The book was put away in such a place as if to forget its very existence unless you intended to fetch it voluntarily. In other words, it was in a place where it wouldn't be seen unless you prepared something like a stepladder. I didn't even know myself why I had noticed such a place. But, as if I felt something was there, I pulled the chair for the guests which was placed in a corner and climbed on it. Since he had gone to the villa father wouldn't appear suddenly. I had already lost the feeling of tension.

.....Why did father have a romance novel?

That was the first impression I had of it. He wasn't a person interested in others' love

stories, much less in a work of fiction, it would probably never even catch his attention. That was the kind of person my father was. Even I myself, as my maximal priority was to fight against my hapless fate, while I knew that book was popular in the high society, I never thought of reading it. Because I had heard it was a usual story of love between people of different social caste you could find everywhere. That's why, I felt a sense of discomfort with the fact such a book was in father's study, and while pondering about it with a tilted head, I turned the pages. Not even knowing that an important secret was hidden there.

"Al, can you open the book at its last page?"

Not telling anything, I suddenly asked the confused Al who was touching the spine of the book with his long fingers to turn the pages. He was making a perplexed expression but still followed my order without showing any reluctance in particular. Since it was just a matter of opening the book it didn't take any time at all. Then, after a moment of silence...

".....Silvia-sama...?" He squeezed out the name of my little sister.

When I found this book in father's study, I confirmed its content without delay and heaved a sigh when I saw it was undoubtedly the same as the story I knew. I didn't know if it was a sigh of relief or discouragement. Anyway, the weight on my shoulders was removed as there was nothing recorded about the happenings controlling my life. Then, at that time, I found that thing.

"Is it a sketch? No, it's a portrait... isn't it?"

I quietly nodded at Al's question. That's right. That was what was drawn on the white sheet, on the very last page of this novel. A picture drawn with a messy pen that looked like a scribble. Yet, this image was also accompanied by a pathetic feeling of it being an ephemeral and fleeting dream. Like Al, I had also thought it was a painting of Silvia. Feeling a bit afraid at how jealous I was of that adored child, I had closed that book. Even if our mothers were different, the fact that both Silvia and I were father's

daughters wouldn't change..... It was how things should have been. And yet, these really small details showed off the difference in the affection we received, making my heart creak. My fingers which were tracing the book's back cover were slightly trembling, and from the bottom of my heart I felt pity for the parents of my first life that had abandoned me. Pretending to be calm again after having taken a few deep breaths, when I tried to put back the book to its original place... what was the sudden feeling of discomfort I sensed? I didn't know what, but I felt that "something" was wrong.

"That, you see Al... it is not Silvia."

If you opened the book once again and looked closely from cover to cover, you will derive the answer in due course. The date, era and father's name were engraved there. All the paintings father drawn had his signature and the date, it seemed to be a habit of him and it proved it all. It proved that what was written down here, had been made long, long before Silvia was born.

"It isn't Silvia-sama...? No, but... her face... looks a lot like hers."

The woman on that piece of paper had almost the same face as Silvia. Because she wasn't drawn in color, it couldn't be proved it was a different person. Humans with delicate silver hairs like those of Silvia were very rare in this country. If that woman in the drawing had blond hairs, just by seeing her people would have understood she was a different person. But that woman who was drawn with only dark ink was simply smiling cheerfully like she was gazing at something outside a window.

"This is, Silvia's real... mother."

A date anterior to Silvia's birth. A face that was similar to hers. The fact that father drew it. From all these, it wasn't that hard to deduce the answer.

"...Silvia-sama's mother?"

The question was why was it drawn “in this book”? The “me” of that life who discovered this book took it out of father’s study and brought it back to the estate I was living with Soleil. Then, I hid it in the dresser in my room. It was after this that I began to act in order to sweep away the doubts that had arisen in my heart.

I had to meet the author, to meet them, and talk with them.

It wasn’t like I was threatened by someone, yet I still had the sensation I was practically being coerced. For me who already had become “the next marquis’ wife” and possessed several connections, I had a few means of tracking down the author who was living somewhere in this country, so I didn’t think setting a meeting would be difficult. Then some time passed, and it happened like expected. It fell on the palm of my hands, like a raindrop falling from a cloudy sky. The end which was exactly like I had imagined was lying in wait.

“She is a beautiful person, isn’t she? She looked almost the same as Silvia...”

“This person...”

Al heave a sigh of admiration and astonishment, his gaze fixed on the portrait of the woman. His blue eyes clearly displayed his curiosity. I couldn’t see any other emotion apart from this one. It made me feel relieved. If Soleil had been the one looking at that picture, surely, he would have searched for Silvia’s features in that woman drawn in ink. Then, these thin iced eyes of him would slightly loosen and he would smile broadly while his fingers would gently trace the lines of the portrait. Tenderly, as if they were touching Silvia. Because I could imagine this scene quite clearly, something was wrong with me too. Or else, had I seen this scene somewhere in one of my lost lives?

“But still, it’s mysterious, isn’t it?”

Al removed his line of sight from Silvia’s mother and looked at me with a bitter smile. Then he tilted his head and said,

“It’s natural that Silvia-sama’s mother had existed... no, of course it’s natural, but...”

It’s somewhat hard to believe, said Al without any ill will nor deeper meaning. He was simply stating a fact. There were some who were convinced that Silvia, with her weak constitution and whose existence itself was fleeting and ephemeral, wasn’t a real person. They wouldn’t be surprised if they were told she was born from a flower seed. It certainly felt strange and mysterious that a woman who gave birth to such a Silvia existed. The first time the “past me” was confronted with this fact, I had also thought the same thing as Al. For that reason, I secretly tried to imagine the person that no one knew about. The hair color of the person who was Silvia’s mother. Her eyes, her voice. I wonder if she spoke with that tone, if she made such gestures, with what kind of expression did she embrace Silvia..... Silvia’s weak constitution, did it come from her blood lineage? There were many, many things I wanted to ask and to know. But I won’t get those answers. Because I will never meet Silvia’s mother.

On the other hand, there was something I understood without having to do any research. This book was “father’s book”, but this didn’t indicate who its owner was. Exactly as stated, I meant this in the literal sense.

Inside the book, a certain knight was drawn. A man belonging to a middle ranked noble family who fell in love with the princess of the neighboring country... her escort knight. That was exactly.....

My father.

When I reach that truth, rather than feeling a shock run through my body, it felt more like both a sudden realization and a feeling of resignation. *Ah, I see*. I simply understood. For our society, it was only a common, morganatic (cross-class) love. But for the involved persons, it was the greatest romance of the century. It was such a dramatic story that it became a book. Although it was presented as a “work of fiction” for the rest of the world, but the characters weren’t completely fictional. However, my mother wasn’t the princess of a neighboring country. It was something I was sure of as her real daughter. And if she wasn’t, it meant the protagonist of this book wasn’t mother.

But, it was also true that my mother wasn’t born in this country.

“...Lady?”

As I was completely immersed in my thoughts, Al called out to me with hesitation. I continued to think while looking at his face. If I wanted to tell him everything, then I had to do it now. However, by doing so there was a possibility the road ahead would divert greatly.

“Alfred is so pitiable. Because he had you as his master, he died.”

The words I heard in one of my lives emerged in my mind. While I hesitated over what I should say, at the moment I slowly opened my mouth...

.....*Knock, knock.*

Someone knocked at the door of my room.

Chapter 26

If this is the real end (9)

It was Al who reacted to the dry knocking sound that resounded several times. I guessed he had sensed someone's presence before the door was knocked. He gazed at me, seemingly asking me what should be done, but I had no other choice but to nod. I didn't know who it was but they had probably come while knowing I was inside the room. But for a short while Al didn't move from his spot. As there weren't any maid right now, only him could open the door. Looking like he wanted to say something, he curled his lips and heaved a little sigh before speaking in a low voice, "We will continue this later." He probably wanted to make sure his voice wouldn't reach the other side of the door. Then he suddenly closed the book and quietly returned it to me. "Is it alright with you?" He asked to make sure, but I couldn't answer anything. Instead I directed my gaze at the door to urge him to show the visitor in. For a moment, Al's looked displeased, but he didn't say anything and followed my instructions.

"Please, wait a moment." I followed his back with my eyes as he turned toward the door while raising his voice.

He probably had sensed I would no longer talk about this matter. If I was only able to muster my courage once, it could be said it would have been at that one moment. But I did not do so. If I was to borrow someone's help, that person would surely be Al. Now that I had lost the absolute existence that was Crow, speaking of a person I could trust from the bottom of my heart, it was that escort knight. That's why, I knew I must cherish him. I was barely holding back my wavering and sinking heart that was about to tumble and fall at Al's feet.

".....Big sister..."

The voice of my lovely little sister called me back from the sea of thoughts I was immersed in. Her nervous face slightly red, she was standing behind the door opened

by Al. I immediately realized she had a fever. Silvia entered inside the room while walking unsteadily and heavily breathing. The short distance from her room to mine had put her breathing in disorder.

“Silvia, you should be resting right now.”

When I propelled myself up while calling out to her, Silvia asked with ambiguous words as she threw a fleeting glance toward Al, “It’s the same for you, big sister. I heard you had drown in the bath...” Then she suddenly fell silent. It seemed she was hesitating whether it was alright to talk about this here. Drowning in the bath was due to my own blunder, and if people heard about it, it could become a drawback for me. If you only looked at that part of her, I thought that child too seemed to be growing properly. “Al knows so it is fine to speak about it,” when I told her that with a smile, Silvia also released a small sigh and smiled. This ephemeral and fragile face somewhat made my chest ache.

She was truly concerned about me. Silvia was very kind. She was pushing herself despite her poor condition to visit her sick older sister.

“Hum... if it is alright with you...”

Al supported Silvia’s wavering body until she reached my bed. My little sister who hanged her head, saying “I’m sorry” with her cheek dyed red, was so lovely people couldn’t help but see her in a favorable light. She aroused the desire to protect her in every member of our family. The scene of my escort knight leading such a feeble girl by the hand was extremely natural and didn’t have the slightest sense of incongruity. But somehow, I tilted my head, feeling a kind of discomfort as if something was “wrong.” Something appealed to my intuition that the problem was with those two. Wasn’t the pairing of Silvia and Al wrong? I probably had this feeling because the person beside Silvia wasn’t Soleil. I suddenly realized I was surprised at myself for having such a thought, and I heaved out the breath I had hold unconsciously. Surprised by how conspicuous my breathing sounded was inside the room that had fallen silent again, I shrunk my shoulders. The pain and distress I felt weren’t from my imagination.

“Big sister, are you alright?”

My little sister who had approached within a reaching distance when I wasn't paying attention took my hand in hers. This gentle action made me feel dizzy. I, being the lamentable coward I was, couldn't grasp that hand.

“Yes I am fine, do not worry.”

I answered while shaking my head, but my own voice sounded like those of a stranger. It felt like a voice without emotion. However, Silvia didn't seem to notice and smiled lightly.

“...This, it's a decoction mother had infused for me.”

She gently presented me a small bottle, holding it out like it was a treasure. Then putting on airs like she was very satisfied of herself, she placed it in my hand. Light brown leaves were jammed to the fill inside the glass bottle. “It doesn't... taste very good though.” She laughed and smiled like a mischievous child, adding “keep it a secret from mother, ok?” while she put her index finger on her lips. “It's supposed to have the effect of warming up the body.” As she explained the effects she tenderly stroked my arm. Her fingers were barely touching my skin, stroking it with the softness of feathers.

“Silvia?”

My little sister whose gaze had dropped on her own fingers suddenly rose her head. “Ah, sorry. You seemed cold, that's why...” She distanced her hands. I lost that warmth too abruptly and almost unconsciously chased after those fingers. Perhaps I didn't want to lose this gentleness that was offered with unselfishness. Opening her eyes wide, Silvia grabbed back my hand without hesitation.

I knew that it was these hands that would rob me of everything. But at the same time,

I remembered, in the past, it was the same hands that had protected me.

.....*That's all?*

I felt that Crow was laughing. Laughing that I would tolerate and excuse her from everything, just because of that.



The next day, by some kind of fate, I happened to meet with Soleil in the corridor of the academy.

“...Once in a while, wouldn't you eat together with me?”

Even if he invited me without relaxing his stiff expression, as we were in front of outsiders I couldn't decline. Because he was the heir of a marquis house, as his fiancé there was no way I could say “I don't want to.” If we had been alone it wouldn't have been embarrassing for him, but at any rate right now we were in the middle of the corridor. Several students happened to be passing by us and they were straining their ears to hear my words. And more than anything. As the man standing a bit behind Soleil was staring fixedly at me, I couldn't show the slightest carelessness. He wasn't the friend who was always around Soleil. It was quite unusual and I also shouldn't have cross path with them. Yet my eyes had met with Soleil's as he seemed to be looking for me unexpectedly. Usually, I lowered my gaze and concealed my presence to not be found out by him, yet for some reason today I saw him. And it wasn't only Soleil who noticed me despite my cautions.

“...Is she your rumored fiancé?”

Stepping forward with a big smile on his face, Saion approached us. He pretended it was the first time meeting me and slyly asked this question while tilting his head obliquely. In those dark colored pupils of his, a light was glowing and he was comparing both of our faces as though they were very interesting. I didn't know what the conversation between Saion and me would look like in the eyes of a third party. Would someone notice we were already acquainted with each other? If we were

meeting for the first time here, then like anyone who was from a noble family I had to past a smile on my face and give my greetings. No matter how agonizing it was. When I slightly bend my knees, Scion imperceptibly raised his eyebrow and curved his lips as if what he was seeing seemed interesting. He looked like he was about to let a laugh escape his mouth and was enduring it.

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am called Ilya Il Marchisse.”

From the standpoint of the fiancé of Soleil, eldest child of the marquis house, it wasn't appropriate to assume a humble attitude when meeting people for the first time. Although giving out your name first showed you were of a lower social status, there was no need to abase myself more than that. I had to pay the greatest caution so as to not bring shame on Soleil's family name. With just this, my own position from now on could change. As I had already guessed that Saion was a higher aristocrat from another country, I intended to be especially careful. Meanwhile, Soleil was silently watching over what I did, not answering Saion question “is she your fiancé?” nor supplementing my self-introduction by confirming that it was indeed me. It probably meant he had no intention to introduce me as his fiancé. Or because it was a well-known fact, did he thought there was no need to expressly explain it here?

“Nice to meet you, young lady. My name is Saion Topias.”

There weren't any malice on his grinning face, but calling me “young lady” was a boorish manner of speaking. It could be taken as if he was looking down on me. It was an expression used by a man in the prime of his life to address a younger woman, in other words it wasn't a salutation exchanged between a man and a woman close in age. If this was an evening party, it would be a sign of showing contempt for someone. However, he was someone from another country. He may not be used to our way of speaking yet... It was probably better to think this way. It wasn't like I had alluded to this topic here, but it was a fact he had revealed himself previously. In such a case, I wondered what kind of attitude was the correct answer.

But then at that moment, I noticed a piercing gaze was directed at me.

“...Soleil-sama?”

Because I had unintentionally whispered, I quickly swallowed my breath. Soleil who was looking in my direction from Saion's side probably had the same expression as me. It was somewhat laughable that the both of us were surprised, but I bet I was surely not in his sight. Although Saion was looking around as if he wanted to say something, Soleil had already regained his calm and shook his head with his usual unreadable expression. Nothing was expressed in those thin-iced eyes of him. *Well, I guess it doesn't matter*, said Saion as he laughed lightly. “Then, shall we go?” he added, seemingly intended to sit with us. He started walking. The people around us were openly gazing at Soleil and I who remained behind. While being exposed to these uncomfortable gazes, I looked up at Soleil who stood beside me. Then, Soleil who was looking toward me as before turned in gaze away without saying anything. He was prompting me with his eyes to follow after Saion, but the truth was, I was at a loss of where I should sit at. I had not even replied to Soleil who offered to eat together.

I stared at his back as he was walking a few steps ahead of me. He wasn't waiting for my answer.

“It's fine to take your time, so tell me alright?”

With a gentle gaze, with a whispering voice, Soleil had said this to my little sister. I had certainly heard it, but I couldn't remember when it was. It might have been during the tea party, or it might have been at another occasion. But it probably wasn't important. Silvia who said something with her reddened cheeks, and Soleil who looked at her with a loving gaze. His eyes seemed to be saying he unquestionably preferred my little sister's reserved attitude. I, who was out of their field of vision but definitively not at a distance far away, concealed my breathing. At that time, I already knew I mustn't get in their way and disturb the two of them.

On that day I was introduced as his fiancé, in the garden, Soleil had been waiting for me to catch up to him. The image of him waiting without urging me surfaced on the back of my eyelids. The him who had slightly loosen his lips and smiled at the moment I finally caught up, was nowhere to be find now.

“That reminds me, I haven’t seen you around much, where do you usually have lunch?”

We secured a table for four people, and Soleil and I sat facing each other. Saion was sitting next to Soleil. I didn’t know if this alignment was correct or not. I unavoidably started to wonder, if it had been Silvia where would she have sat?

“...Are there any places where you can have lunch apart from the cafeteria?”

Even though he already knew the answer, Saion maliciously asked this nasty question while making a truly mysterious expression. This person who was easily deceiving the people around him, was he Soleil’s friend? I felt he would be both dreadful and reliable.

“Usually, I take it in the courtyard...”

As I answered, I floated an ambiguous smile. If you were a considerate person, you would discontinue this topic here, but Saion didn’t seem to be reading the air and continued “Do you have lunch with your friends?” Asking about something he already ought to know, it probably had a deeper meaning. As I didn’t understand what his objective was, I could only continue to answer his question. “No, I am always alone.” Although I said this with the intention of implying it wasn’t a big deal,

“.....By yourself?”

The one who showed a reaction was Soleil. “Y-yes, that is right” I was greatly taken aback. My eyes opened wide. Because Soleil had shown some interest in me. My body temperature rose suddenly. It was laughable how discomposed I became just with this. I also knew that Saion was intently observing such a foolish me. However, I couldn’t keep up my appearance, my heart was helplessly feeling exhilarated. Even though I was thinking I was acting like an idiot, but a smile naturally floated on my lips.

“...In that case, when our schedules correspond, let’s eat together.”

In the cafeteria bursting with the noise of conversation, Soleil’s voice stood out. I wondered if I hadn’t heard him wrong but I realized it was unlikely for him to repeat himself. So, I just stared at his face fixedly. I thought he would correct his words, saying it was a slip of the tongue. However, he didn’t say anything, his eyes simply reflected my own face. As if he was waiting for an answer in the meantime, he gulped down. Like I had received an unthinkable request, or had been offered a business deal, my back strengthened up tensely. Saion destroyed that atmosphere in an instant with the laughter he didn’t intent to conceal.

“Even though you are engaged, something is strange.”

It’s strange to be that nervous, he continued. Then, as if he couldn’t bear it he laughed again. “You almost look like strangers.” However, his voice didn’t contain any laughter, it was indifferently announcing facts. And I couldn’t deny his words, I even reflexively agreed with him. The feeling of distance between us had not narrowed at all since the day we met. That day I was running after his little back, I believed without any doubt that someday I would stand beside him and see the same scenery. However, reality wasn’t as sweet. We were never facing the same direction nor could my wish of seeing the same panorama come true. How could I have predicted that the day he would look at another woman than me would come?

“Shut up, Saion.”

Soleil threw a fleeting glance at the person sitting beside him and declared this in a cold voice. I was the only one whose shoulders jolted in surprised. Saion spread open both of his hands, answering without any concern, “yes, yes” as he pretended to surrender. It was probably a normal conversation for two friends. The one who wasn’t used to it, was just me. “...Ilya.” When my name was called as if he was pressing me for an answer, I could only agree, “Yes, I guess.” In the end, I had no objection to have lunch together as it was “if our schedules correspond.” I thought it was the correct conduct a fiancé should take. If there was no little sister there.

“Then, we must also invite Silvia-chan, right?”

I couldn't see Saion's maliciousness as he cut in between us while smiling... I was pretending I couldn't see it. I felt the question Saion threw toward Soleil and I wandered in the air. The one who will receive and answer it will probably be Soleil. Even I understood it wasn't a good idea to answer no here. If I was a “nice older sister” to Silvia, then I should agree to Saion's proposal. Soleil saw me receiving Saion's gaze on my whole body and yet being unable to say anything, he couldn't remain indifferent and inhaled a small breath. Then, he accepted as if it was truly nothing important, “Yes, indeed.” I, who was listening to his voice as I pretended it was someone's else business, I wonder how I looked in the eyes of the people around us? When I suddenly rose my head, at the end of my line of sight, Saion was here, his eyes scrutinizing me. It looked like a smiling expression, as if he was trying to ascertain something. It was an expression you would often see in the high society. That's why I also simply returned a smile.

“...By the way Saion, I have a question for you if you don't mind.”

Soleil changed the topic of the conversation quite casually. He slightly dropped his voice and started whispering with Saion. Even so, sometimes, a smile would float on his lips for a moment so it seemed their conversation wasn't particularly serious. From a few words I barely heard, I guessed it probably was about the internal affairs of the knight department. Even during a lunch where I was wondering if we were probing each other or not, while they were frivolously bragging about various things, their discussion gave off a feeling of frankness. Because the two of them held an important peerage, in the academy they were in a position to be attended by the people from the same department.

Even if they didn't order, when they took a seat, an eye-catching meal would be served. It was a lavish meal made for aristocrats. Now that I thought about it, it was the first time I was having lunch together with Soleil in the cafeteria. In all those accumulating life of mine, in all this time that repeated itself, being invited for a meal, being promised to do it again, it was the first time for all of them. The reason my back was trembling, was surely because of the chills I felt. Even though time passed normally, I was driven by impatience and uneasiness, as if someone was chasing after me. It felt like many pitch-black hands were crawling like worms, trying to seize my back.

Run away, run away, run away, yet it was a fate I couldn't escape from.

“...Soleil-sama?”

The sudden appearance of my little sister was like a plot, it was like one of the small incidents of the big course of events. As expected, I had no other choice but to watch it unfold. The face of Soleil who had rose his head abruptly was of a different color than before. This pale colored eyes of him had melt in a second and showed a strong emotion. That's right, it was like usual. I didn't think anyone had noticed it. If you were to blink once and observe him again, you would think it was a misunderstanding as he was already making an unimpressed expression.

At once, I swallowed my voice that was about to call his name. Had I called him, I wouldn't have known what to say.

Chapter 27

If this is the real end (10)

Ultimately, I simply watched my little sister's entry on stage. As if I was looking at the events happening in a distant world. There was nothing to put into words, nothing to interject, I was simply "here" like an ornament. If this was a stage, I would be applauding at the appearance of the protagonist, but this was an unfortunate reality. I could only watch this too good to be true story unfold before me.

There wasn't any person who would notice that I was looking at this scene. That's how much of a minor character I was. However, perhaps I wasn't even a character of this story, perhaps I was only an onlooker.

"I heard that Soleil-sama was having lunch with someone."

Silvia who suddenly appeared in the cafeteria shyly declared this while lowering her eyes.

"Oh, I see! When you heard Soleil was eating with someone else, you came to see that woman's face!!"

I thought this cheerful voice somewhat sounded like it was acting out a play. Saion's piercing voice echoed in the dining hall, gathering all eyes on us. In spite of saying the same things as Silvia, didn't the way he phrased it gave a different impression? Although his words could be taken as unpleasant sarcasm, if you examined his expression you would know there wasn't such a thing and he was simply teasing her. As the target of his prank was Silvia, an awfully charming scene was displayed in front of our eyes.

"...n-no, that's wrong, I-I was..."

The cheeks of Silvia who denied Saion's words with her head hang down were bright red. Somewhere inside the cafeteria, voices mixed with sighs exclaiming "so cute!" leaked out. Indeed, my little sister was very adorable. Better yet, it seemed she even charmed the persons of the same sex. When seeing Silvia's appearance, the people around us would relax and smile. Even if those persons didn't know her. She had something that made people want to protect her.

From the moment Silvia appeared, I had been severed from "this world." This world where Silvia and Soleil, as well as Saion existed, was separated from me by a glass window and the other side I was in became overshadowed. I slowly breathed in and out, grasping my fingers tightly. If I rose my fist, surely, I could break that glass. If I employed force, then it wouldn't be hard to enter the other side of this window. But I would be the only one hurt by the slinters of the broken glass. They would surely criticize me. For getting in the way of their rest, of their enjoyment. I would be the only one hurt by their thoughtless words, they wouldn't even notice how they injured me.

I pressed my lips that almost drawn an arc unconsciously and looked at them as if nothing had happened. The three of them who didn't notice my gaze, were laughing as if this incident was really amusing. In the first place, it was impossible for Soleil to have lunch with an unknown girl of doubtful origin.

"But I'm truly glad. That the one you were with was big sister."

Walking to the chair beside me, Silvia who had bent her knees to peer into my expression narrowed her eyes. Even though she had realized the one sitting opposite to Soleil was me, was there really any meaning in expressively confirming my face? Silvia's cold breath grazed my cheek. She looked truly relieved from the bottom of her heart, and while floating a smile she innocently removed her line of sight. That Soleil was eating with another person, Silvia wasn't concerned if it was me. That was surely the case. When she said she was glad I was the one here, her words only carried this meaning. Because the one who would have been hurt if Soleil had been having lunch with another girl would be Silvia. So, she was probably thinking it was great Soleil's partner for lunch was me.

Originally, the one who should have been hurt was Soleil's fiancé, me. But it wasn't like Silvia was worried for me. Imagining a scene where Soleil was eating with another

girl, was no more than an unnecessary worry. Silvia was finally starting to comprehend the signification in this academy of a man eating with a woman who wasn't his fiancé.

When she realized the person of the opposite sex who was eating with Soleil was me, Silvia was relieved. That's what she told us. I wasn't a person she needed to be on guard on. She instinctively perceived this. I wasn't a person worth being cautious of. She might not be aware of who Soleil had feeling for. However, she knew he didn't have any for me.

.....Ah, why. Why could I understand Silvia's feelings so well? We will never get close. There was no future where we both live.

"...How about you sit with us?"

As if to fill the momentary silence, Soleil's calm voice resounded. It was a pleasant and kind voice. To other people, it probably sounded like the same voice as always. But today, only me realized he was different from usual.

He was different from usual, different from his usual impassible attitude.

My fingers that were holding a fork were faintly trembling, but I tightened my grip so that no one would be able to realize it. Because I thought it would be unbearable to let other misunderstand the noise I raised in the middle of the meal for sounds made out of anger, like how it happened in the distant past. As there was a third party, Saion, here today, I was dealing with the situation with even more calm than usual. The eyes of outsiders always reminded me of my duty. The position of being the fiancé of the marquis' heir always forced me to "act." Showing a composed expression even if I didn't have any composure, pretending to be serene even if I was feeling shaken, not showing I was grieving when I was overcome with anguish, all of that in order to do the proper thing as a noble lady. It wasn't that hard as I had acted that role any number of times in my accumulated lives. That's why I should have succeeded in making a smile that no one would be able to see through and perceive my real emotions.

I also returned a smile to Silvia who laughed from the bottom of her heart and thanks us, "Thank you for inviting me." There was a kind of composure in her voice as she lowered her head in embarrassment.

“Is your physical condition already fine?”

I asked her this question but something was surely wrong with the words I chose. Hearing me, Silvia nodded her head and started to say something too, “...Yes, hum, is big sister too...” She was probably concerned about the incident that happened yesterday evening. But the fact I almost drown in the bath was supposed to remain a confidential matter. Therefore, Silvia also immediately realized her verbal slip and quickly exclaimed “Ah!” in a flustered tone before shaking her head. Then, with an apologetic expression, she muttered in a mosquito voice “I’m sorry.” Her pitiable appearance as she shrank her body made Soleil’s face contort in a grim expression for a split second. His eyes that swiftly moved to look at my face, even though they knew nothing of our circumstances, felt like they silently condemned me. Pretending I didn’t notice his glare, I said, “It is fine, Silvia. Do not worry.” However, I couldn’t erase the unpleasant mood that had fallen on our table.

“What is it? What happened?” As expected, the one who gleefully took the bait was Saion. Silvia awkwardly rose her head and laughed as if she was embarrassed, “No, it’s nothing.” “If you say that, it’ll make me all the more curious, you know?” Saion pushed Soleil to get his approval, repeating “Right, right?” while suggestively curving his lips in a twist. “...It really is nothing.” When I strengthened my tone intending to back up Silvia, for some reason the one who showed a reaction was the person herself. “I’m sorry, elder sister,” she said as she made her delicate body smaller and smaller. It wasn’t like I was mean to her, so why was she making such an expression? But mysteriously, as I was watching her little face, Saion rebuked, “Hey, hey, don’t make that kind of expression.” Even though I understood his words were clearly directed at me, I didn’t remember having shown an expression that would justify receiving such scolding. I wondered if I looked like I was scowling. But naturally, I didn’t have that intention. That’s why, if it had been the me of a while ago, I would probably have lost my cool and even objected. That being blamed while I hadn’t done anything was too unreasonable. But, now I knew that if I were to do such a thing, the one who would receive a drawback would be me. I repeatedly inhaled and exhaled small breaths to spit out the lumps of heat that had accumulated inside my stomach and dropped my eyes. I thought I had no other choice but to escape from the gazes of my surroundings.

At the corner of my vision, Soleil was elegantly moving his fork and knife. He wasn’t showing any interest in our conversation. No, that’s not it. He probably didn’t have any interest in “me.”

“Hey Soleil, you want to know too, right?” To Saion who was acting lively, Soleil’s calm voice answered, “Be quiet. If you’re like this, Silvia won’t be able to enjoy her meal.” As every last words of his was spoken out of concern for Silvia, this time I couldn’t restrain my laughter. Soleil noticed the puffing that escaped my lips. It’s only at time like this he was sharp sighted.

“Ilya?”

Every time he called my name, my heart tightened a little. In one of my past lives, he never called out my name even once. I had been drowned in jeers, called “hateful,” told I would “never be forgiven” and my heart had been smashed by a stabbing glare. I remember that figure of him very well. Even though the things I couldn’t remember were numerous, only the scene of Soleil rejecting me was engraved in my memory. Even if I didn’t want to remember, no matter how much I wanted to forget, I always remembered it.

When I smiled despite the overwhelming emotions that made me feel nauseated, it irremediably became a painful expression of mixed tears and smile. The moment I rose my face, I met eyes with Soleil. At that instant, he promptly turned his eyes away. As if nothing had happened. I think it was the right reaction. It was his usual self. Unlike the time he was alone with Silvia, now he was no different from usual. But I saw him react like this and I was surprised at the fact he didn’t throw any cruel word at me, really the one who was abnormal was me

“And so? What the hell happened?”

Not having given up yet, Saion was gazing at Silvia with his body leaning forward. I told him, “Do not bother that child too much please.” It was almost an unconscious action. I didn’t have anything in mind when I spoke up. I had simply saw Silvia slightly frown. I only showed a reaction to that face that aroused an absolute desire to protect. But the one who reacted to my voice was a student sitting at the table next to ours. From who knew when, it seemed he had been listening to our conversation.

“...As the rumors said, she’s a fierce woman.”

The voice felt like its owner spoke up unconsciously. And precisely because of that, I understood it was his true thoughts. He didn't seem to be talking to someone else, rather it sounded like he was speaking to himself, and the voice scattered and dispersed in the cafeteria. But it resounded vividly in my ears. Because I knew they were words directed toward me. Everyone was sensitive to the words filled with malice directed at themselves. I glanced at Soleil's, Saion's and Silvia's faces to see if they had noticed it, but their attention had already shifted on something else. Such nonchalant attitudes seemed to be saying they didn't care the slightest about me. Once again, the world was torn in two.

"...Ilya?"

The break would end in around five minutes when Soleil noticed my unusual behavior. Although he didn't even show the slightest sign of awareness toward me who stayed silent until now, I guess he couldn't help but call out to his fiancé who was hanging her head down when his line of sight fell on her on a whim. That's probably it. He had been like this from long ago. He would always continue to be my "proper fiancé".

"No, it is nothing..."

And I will continue to be a convenient fiancé for him.

I'll continue while knowing it's an empty and fruitless relation devoid of any salvation. Even my willpower to change something has been shaved off, I could only accept the reality. What on earth has my previous self accomplished? And the one before her? What about the one from even before? Have I, in any of my lives, managed to achieve anything at all? In order to be with Soleil, or maybe, in order to prepare for my unreasonable death, I tried to live but. This, did it have any meaning at all?

No matter what, why and how I did things, I could never get Soleil's heart. Even though I realized it a long time ago...

I was unable to forget the little hand extended toward me.

Soleil's hand was surely a reed, a grass, a twig, the root of a tree. It was floating at the surface of the water, and I desperately grabbed it. You could say that for me, who was drowning at the bottom of the river, I had no other choice but to cling and rely on it. Even if, despite seizing it, it didn't mean I could get my head above the water. After all, it wasn't like I had received something that would pull me up. Still, I, who kept struggling, couldn't help but clutch on something. I don't know if I maybe wanted to be saved. But, because I was awfully terrified at the thought of sinking alone... I carefully wrapped both hands around the leaves of the small, small grass that were embracing my chest. Even though I felt that something important was reflected beyond the other side of the water. My consciousness will disappear while I'll be unable to judge what it was.

After all, it was better like this. It was better to not know anything... it's better... this way.

Chapter 28

If this is the real end (11)

In the cafeteria, I said good bye to Soleil and Saion and walked away with Silvia. It was very rare for us to be alone together. In the corridor that wasn't wide, the students we passed by purposely turned back to confirm our face. I wonder how many times I have heard the words "You don't look alike" again and again? The fact Silvia was walking half a step behind me seemed to invite the curious glances of our surrounding. When I heard someone whispering "Has she been called out?" I could only smile bitterly. I cannot understand what meaning there could possibly be in summoning my little sister in the academy. If I had something I wanted to say, it was obvious I would talk about it in a discrete place. And the most suitable place for that was nowhere else but our house. I wondered why nobody noticed how foolish it would be to call out Silvia to rebuke her inside the academy.

No, that's not it. Certainly, up until now, I had been that kind of person. I was that kind of unsightly and disgusting woman devoured by jealousy who restrained everyone with a high-pitched voice. Yes, until that day. That day when we had a tea party in the estate's garden.....

"Hm, B-big sister. I'm sorry."

Hearing Silvia's quiet apology, I answered, "...What are you apologizing for?" Yet, I didn't stop walking. "For going to the cafeteria on my own accord..." I endured not bursting into laughter at those words. What are you saying when until now, you have been having lunch together with Soleil every day?

"Don't mind it Silvia. I too, don't mind it at all."

I thought that no matter who would see this scene, it would be great if all that could be reflected was the portray of a kind older sister. That's why I slowly and deliberately made a gentle smile. I smiled brightly, my eyes didn't contain any hint of animosity, my

tone of voice was drop a little low. I didn't forget my intonation and inflection. Putting some zeal into my fingers, I brushed my little sister's hairs. "Really?" she asked me as I pat her head like I was comforting a young child. A dearest child. Yes, surely. Surely, I loved my little sister. Seeing Silvia heave a little sigh and smile, for some reason my chest squeezed out painfully for a second. She was trusting me. It wasn't my imagination. If so, why, why do you betray your older sister you trust so much?

I still remembered the hatred existing in the future that has yet to come. That's right. Originally, I was such a person. I was an ugly person who couldn't hide my hatred and resentment.

I felt the silver hairs coiling around my fingers and gently brushed them off. Silvia smiled happily with her eyes closed. I wondered why kind of face I, who was looking down on such a little sister, was making. It would be great if I could act well. If I could act the part of a kind older sister. Of a perfect lady. If I could become a person who loved her family, loved her little sister, a person who wasn't drowning in jealousy but was wearing a smile like a holy mother.

"Well, Silvia. Class will resume soon. We have to separate here."

Just after turning at the corner of the corridor, Silvia nodded and answered, "Yes!" then she made a beautiful bow and looked up at my face. I returned a smile to that child who was sticking out her chest in pride. Compared to a few months ago, Silvia had become more similar to what a "noble's young daughter" should be like. I watched a dainty little back walked away in rhythm then closed my eyes for a brief moment. I wished I would throw away the muddy feelings that were whirling inside my chest.

I remembered the days I educated her to prepare for running away in my past life. I remembered my sister's ephemeral face as she laughed, confessing, "I, until now, I've always felt I was already dead." She told me she was happy to be able to learn. I remembered her acting faithful to her words, greedily absorbing and understanding everything I taught. I suddenly recalled those days filled with laughter as we browsed through bulky collection of books, sitting side-by-side. Among the many lives I've lived, it's in this one I first cuddled with Silvia. These were happy but irremediably bitter days.

The emptiness of having to throw away my everything, of having to hand it out to my

little sister. How can I put it into words?

Even if it could be said I've done my best until the point of coughing blood, all those things I had obtained, they hadn't been of any use. There were only knowledge meant to be passed down to my little sister.

I knew that only knowledge and education would become the things supporting me, so I simply single-mindedly polished myself, and yet, I had never been able to make use of even one of those skills. I recalled a dream I had, where I was travelling with nobles from foreign countries, being considered their equal, while teaching Silvia foreign languages I learnt for diplomacy. As I was Soleil's wife, I should never be obtrusive and butt in his affairs. But I had persuaded myself I mustn't become an existence that could only be protected. At least, I thought it would be great if I could be of help to him. For him who wanted a strong woman to be his wife, I did my best to become such a person. And everything I had accumulated every day in this way... I offered it to my little sister. This feeling of emptiness, this bitterness, this resentment, I didn't know how to express it. I didn't want to think that all the time I spent had been in vain. That's why I handed over everything and anything I had to my little sister.

"You are an idiot. A really foolish idiot."

As I was about to go down the staircase, suddenly a voice resounded inside my ears. It was an unfamiliar voice I didn't recognize. When, who, what were these words for? They weren't said in this life. I understood that. As I was searching through my memories, my tiptoes were stuck on the step and I stumbled. Ah! When I realized it was already too late.

.....I'm falling!

I extended my left hand to support me but it missed the handrail and grabbed empty air instead. My heart beat strongly once then stopped making noise. But, at that moment.

"Look out!"

Someone grabbed my arms from behind. I was stopped at the middle of the stairs, my back leaning on someone. Half of my legs were stretched out in an unsightly appearance. "...I, I'm sorry." I put my hands on my chest, trying to push back my violent heart that was beating loudly. But now was not the time to be feeling relieved. Since I knew from the voice I heard earlier that the person supporting me was a man, I promptly looked around. While I heaved a relieved sigh because nobody had seen us, I put a hand on the arm wrapped around my stomach that was supporting me.

"...I am fine now. I deeply apology for the trouble I caused you."

I was aware it was a bit rude of me but it wouldn't be could to be seen in this posture by someone. I twisted my body and gently separated. I slowly went down two steps, then when I turned around to bow and present my thanks once again, the person who was here was unexpectedly him.

"Eh?... You're Soleil's..."

While I had become petrified in the middle of lowering my head, he whispered that without trying to hide his surprise. A familiar head of reddish brown hairs. Someone who had been a friend of Soleil for a long time... Yes, I certainly knew this face well. He was always beside Soleil in the academy. Even after graduation, he was a person who would belong to the same knight group as him and become his partner. As Soleil's fiancé and after I had become his wife, I've meet this person any number of times but in my remaining memories, I didn't recall having a conversation with him even once. He was always gazing at me as if he was observing me. Looking at me with a gaze that was never friendly, seemingly wanting to say something. However, he had never said anything.

"..."

"..."

We stared at each other silently. Fortunately, class had started again, so there was no

presence nor any sign someone would come over here. His reddish hairs that were gently fluttering were kind of nostalgic for some reason, they reminded me of the numerous lives which had already ended. I hadn't had much involvement with the person who was currently so close I could touch him. It was so in all my lives so far. This was surely because he himself didn't have a good opinion of me. However, I thought that he had developed friendly relations with Silvia. As a friend of Soleil to the last.

.....Oh, that's right. It happened on the day of my wedding with Soleil. Although he hadn't given me the slightest word of compliment, he was the person who had greatly praised Silvia. I thought he did it instead of Soleil, who couldn't compliment Silvia in front of the bride. To that child who was wearing a beautiful flower ornament in her silver hairs, he said, "You look like a princess" In front of my eyes, he declared so without the slightest bit of reservation. I bet he wasn't even aware that it hurt me. For him it was only a banal compliment, a normal event not worth mentioning.

"...I am truly grateful for your help."

Since we were simply single-mindedly staring at each other, no progress was made. Making a weak smile, I lowered my head. I thought it would be fine if it looked like I was feeling bashful. When I tried to turn away and leave before being told anything, he called out to me, "Wa-wait please." His voice echoed in the empty staircase where it's only the two of us. Because of it, I certainly couldn't pretend not having heard him. When I exhorted my wavering heart and looked over my shoulder,

"Are you feeling unwell somewhere?"

I was taken aback by the words I hadn't expected. His expression really seemed like he was truly concerned about me..... But it shouldn't have been the case. "No, I am fine." Although I tried to deny it while shaking my head, now that someone else had pointed it out I realized I was truly feeling bad. It seemed my breath was hot like I had a fever. The corner of my vision started becoming vaguely fuzzy and just as I narrowed my eyes, the world lost its colors. As if a curtain was closing, the darkness slowly came.

“You’re so pitiful, even though you’ve been reduced to this state, you’re still believing in Soleil, aren’t you?”

I was seeing a hallucination. I knew it, so I blinked a few times but instead of driving away the darkness, I saw iron rods lined up vertically at regular intervals. At that moment, damp air covered the surroundings. The heavy air obstructed my throat. Cracked stone walls, a floor covered in mold and slime, the stench of something unknown. In the distance someone was groaning, the sound of metal behind beaten with who know what echoed in my ears. One after the other the stinking smell and that scene were being revived. I remembered everything.

Ah, I see, it’s the prison.

When I rose up my line of sight absent-mindedly, on the other side of the iron bars, someone is standing here, looking down on me. That man was looking at me who was collapsed on the floor, staring at me fixedly.

“This guy won’t come. It’s a pity, but he truly, won’t come.”

.....This, was a memory of my first life.

“I’m sorry for you but it’s the reality, you know?”

The words he fired as if he wanted to persuade me, kept falling as if they were stones being thrown at me. It hurt, it hurt, it hurt. It hurt as if my skin was torn apart. Even without anyone having to do anything specifically, I will die soon. That’s how hard the blow I took was, that’s how much I had been injured. And yet, why was he specifically trying to stab me with a finishing blow?

“It’s stupid. You’re truly a fool... You can try struggling and denying it all you want, but no one can reverse fate.”

In the jail where light wouldn’t reach, his hair which should have been of a shining

reddish brown like a polished copper coin appeared very dull. I no longer understood what kind of emotions were dwelling inside his eyes. My voice wouldn't come out and my consciousness was muddy. Even I understood my end was approaching. That's why I had wished to meet "him" on my last moments. He had... Soleil had turned away from me and left without looking back even once. He kept ignoring the crying voice of his wife. I remembered this scene, his leaving back, my extended fingers that couldn't reach it.

"He and she, met by fate. No, their meeting was unfortunately predestined. Your will had nothing to do in this. It's called 'destiny' precisely because one can never fight against it."

That's why, every thing you did, was in vain.

The voice that announced this, might have sounded like it was overflowing with pity. Even while I thought we hadn't met much, he specifically came to see me who was restrained in this jail. Besides, I really must have been a fool since I was trying to notice a special meaning in his words. "You'd better give up and die." Soon after I pondered over his words thrown out in a whisper, my consciousness was cut. Was I merely fainting, or rather, did I...

...just like his words, did I die?

"...Ilya-sama?"

Before I realized, the young man was peering into my face, at a distance close enough for our breath to touch. The present was like this. It wasn't that jail. The him who had reached adulthood wasn't here. Although my shivering lips tried to form some words, they stayed stuck into my throat and only a faint breath could pass. It seemed like I would tumble down if I tried to force them out, it was a sensation as if the blood in my whole body would come out.

I am scared.

I was very clearly aware of this fact. Why did he appear in front of me now? I would

surely have been glad if he had done so in my previous life, or the one before. But, he never involved himself with me even once. An exception only happened once. And it was our chance meeting in that prison. That only happened in my very first life. I didn't remember my last moments. It should have been the case and yet, today in that instant I recalled that dreadful moment terribly clearly.

Something has started to change. I felt it.

As we were facing each other our gazes entangled. "Are you really alright? Your face is completely white..." Just before his stretched-out fingers gently touched my cheek, I retreated back one, two steps back. In all my lives until now, I never had once such contact. The heel of my swaying and trembling right foot slipped.

At that time in my first life, the person who told me, "You'd better give up and die" was laughing.

"Ilya-sama?"

It seemed like I was about to fall down but I barely managed not to. Unable to look straight at his face, I left that place. While my whole body was quivering in chills I couldn't shake out, the past I had wanted to completely forget spread on this side of the real world.

As he was laughing, tears were falling down. Then, he said it.

"I'm sorry." He said.

Chapter 29

If this is the real end (12)

What Soleil's friend was really trying to tell me "at that time," even in this life I still had no idea. Even from now on I'll probably won't understand. Yes, I hope I won't. I was already sick and tired of the things that happened at that time. And perhaps, unless the situation became the same as at that time, he will probably never make such an expression again.

The wife of his friend was imprisoned.

It might seem like an incident that concerned him closely, but in truth it was no more than someone else's problem. Even if he could understand his friend's grief, there was no room for pitying the jailed fiancé who he had never talked to. On the contrary, he might hate her. Her, the sinner who made his friend so grieved. And yet, he came to that place. Despite us being no more than mere acquaintances. Perhaps, he really harbored hatred toward me and he purposely came to see my unsightly death. Yes, I certainly used to think so. To think he came to laugh at me and scorn me.

However, I was probably wrong. That's because he was a noble. In the first place, nobles weren't existence related to places like prisons. I didn't know how it was for the relatives of an inmate, but if the prisoner was a perfect stranger, it wasn't a place you would come on a whim. The people in your entourage would probably frantically try to stop you. Not mentioning the issue of hygiene, it was unthinkable for a noble to come to a place where who knew what kind of diseases were running rampant. Moreover, the prisoners were brutal and offensive. Even if an escort came along, no one knew what could happen. That's why no one would try to send a noble to a prison. That being the case, he must have personally wished to come here. Maybe, he even had to pay quite a sum to do so. If they let a noble enter a place like this, the prison's guards would also have to make sure everything would end safely, so they probably demanded a reward for that.

He came so far to see me. And then, he apologized while crying. I didn't understand the true meaning of his words but, he seemed to grieve over my death. And I had the feeling he regretted the fact he couldn't do anything to help..... If that was indeed the

case, then...

“Did he know that I was falsely accused...?”

When I reached that thought, I shook my head thinking, *even if he did, so what?* Now it was too late for this. Yes, everything was already “too late.” The false charges against me were something that was first established after Silvia’s death. Someone who felt my existence was in the way, took advantage of Silvia’s death to put the crime on me. In other words, the trigger for everything was Silvia’s death, and as long as she would be alive nothing would happen. That’s why making Silvia live became my objective. In all my lives, after that tea party I started to move in order to protect her. I shamelessly asked the marquis’ wife to detach an escort for Silvia. In the shadows, I specifically moved against that band of robbers. Currently, I was still a student so my strength wasn’t enough, but since it had been decided I would marry Soleil, I at least had the backing of his marquis house. So, before long the people who will try to use their power in my back will gradually assemble. I was aware of this. By birth, Soleil was a high ranking noble and he was extremely vigilant, only the people he truly trusted remained by his side. It was well-known that unless a person was introduced by someone trustworthy, he wouldn’t deepen the relationship into a truly friendly one. Maybe because of this, there weren’t only people with solid background around me, people with suspicious lineage also gathered. If they couldn’t come close to Soleil, they tried to do so with his fiancé. It was a natural mentality. By all rights, it wasn’t hard to keep this kind of person away. For something of that degree, if I used the strength of the marquis’ house said to be in control of this country’s dark side, I could easily put some distance between us.

However, Soleil’s mother had declared with an unruffled face, *“If at any rate, someone is trying to use you, do not limit yourself to defense, you must make use of others yourself.”* Do not be someone who is used, become someone who use others, she had said while smiling. And so, in the past, I straight-forwardly followed the path that she had pointed out to me.

“...I’ve been running it circles, haven’t I?”

I whispered so, walking down the deserted corridor. The courtyard was spreading on

the other side of the windows. The white roses had passed their full bloom and were falling, but one day, I had seen Soleil and Silvia cuddling together on a bench there. Even though I certainly felt that something was changing, I couldn't go forward the direction I wanted. As if an invisible and compelling force was at work, I would always be robbed of everything. Because I knew this, because I had previously seen what would happen in my life, little by little I was adding some alterations to it so that it could become as I desired. But eventually, everything would fall apart helplessly.

If, for example, I was someone who knew nothing. In truth, wouldn't I be able to lead a much finer life? Not having seen what happened previously, not knowing of the future waiting for me, didn't it seemed like a life filled with hope? Whether it was suffering and grief, or joy and enjoyment, these hands had the "possibility" to choose. With that, shouldn't I have what one would call a blessed life?

Could I said I was really able to choose something? I looked down on my hands, on my hands that couldn't be described as big. What I was always holding in these hands, was emptiness and phantoms of the past. When was it again, that day when I tried to throw away everything and go somewhere that wasn't this place?



"...My lady? Did something happen?"

Al who was helping with father's work wasn't always by my side. Maybe it might appear strange that in spite of being my escort, he wasn't always with me, but it was only a general way of thinking. The common sense that an escort must be with his target of protection wasn't always true for all nobles. In the first place I was only a student, you could say there was no instance where I went to dangerous places. When I left the estate, I was accompanied by maids and a butler, and since there wouldn't be any occasion where I would become alone, it wasn't like I couldn't move around if my escort wasn't here. Furthermore, the academy's security measures were flawless so bringing along an exclusive escort wasn't necessary. A group of reserve knights called the academy knights were taking turns to protect the school grounds.

In other words, for a person like me who was only commuting between the estate and the academy, there was absolutely no need for a bodyguard. The fact that Al was working as my escort was in the end, only due to the fact I was Soleil's fiancé. The one employing him were our house, but a part of his wages were covered by the marquis'

house. Meaning that, in one of my lives, the fact Al's target of protection was changed from me to Silvia, was due to the intention of the marquis side. My parents probably also requested it strongly. However, the marquis' house had the last word in this. At that time, I had already been abandoned by both my parents and the marquis' family.

The marquis' house was managed by Soleil's parents, but the one taking decisions concerning me should have been Soleil..... Aware of everything, Soleil had willingly chosen Silvia over me.

"My lady?"

"...Ah, Al. Sorry. I was lost in my thoughts."

"...It seems you returned a bit early, are you feeling uncomfortable?"

Talking with Soleil's friend had completely upset me, so I left the academy. Leaving school while classes were in session was naturally prohibited but when something happened and you needed to do so, you had to obtain permission beforehand for it. However, there was an exception to everything and it didn't apply in case of an emergency. In others words, it didn't apply if something happened to your family or relatives, or if you were sick or injured. In such cases you only had to submit a written application and you could leave the school grounds. Well, it was normal to take such situations into account. Then, without waiting for our house's carriage, I found another fiacre and went home.

"Well, I am indeed feeling a bit unwell. I was thinking of resting a little..."

When I said that, Al looked more worried than what I had imagined. He lowered his voice and added as he pushed my back to lead me toward my room, "My lady is always working too hard. Please, rest early today." When I asked him "What about your work?" he replied without turning his face toward me, "Your concern is appreciated but you don't need to worry about the like of me." I understood well his worry for me. But, that kindness somewhat hurt. Like he had said, until now, I had continued to work to my utmost, to the point even I admitted it. Because if I didn't do so, a wall that could never be overcome was waiting. That's why, I was ashamed of myself for letting all

these efforts being wasted at this stage. I thought it might be the first time something like this had happened.

“Before resting, do you wish to drink something?”

As I was questioned while walking in the corridor, when I nodded my head, my excellent escort who guessed my thoughts by signs alone seemed to smile a bit.

“Mother is?”

“In her room, knitting.”

I tilted my head, a bit surprised by the brevity of his answer.

“Is she resting?”

Normally, father tended to spend a lot of time secluded in his study. A part of the documents related to the territory management were left to mother’s discretion. That’s why wives of aristocrats couldn’t be illiterate and ignorant.

“...Lately, she is taking things at a leisure pace.”

My feet stopped at this manner of speaking that seemed to be implying something in a roundabout way. When I looked back, my escort who was standing behind me had also stopped at some distance. It seemed he had predicted in advance I would come to a halt.

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing more than the exact meaning of those words.”

Certainly, he probably meant it literally. But if that was true, then it would be a slight problem. Because the share of work under mother's responsibility wouldn't suddenly decrease one fine day. Even when Silvia was confined in bed due to her sickness and mother nursed her, she always strived to do the work assigned to her. I knew that in order to lessen father's burden even by the slightest bit, she would work on documents until late at night. Since Silvia was in the academy today, it was evident she wasn't sick currently. In others words, now was the time when mother should have been working.

"...Has father said something?"

"No."

Once again, a short answer. It was fine to think that if father hadn't say anything, it meant he purposely left things as they were. Because if he had been worried about something, he would have get the chamberlain or a maid to solve the issue.

"...In that case, there is nothing I must do."

On the contrary, if I did something unasked for, there was the possibility I would earn father's wrath. It was best to leave mother to father.

"Maybe mother is tired."

"Yes, it's probably the case."

This time, his answer didn't feel out of place. In fact, mother's share of work wasn't something that could be done in one's spare time. If her decisions were wrong, the population of the fief would be put in a predicament. It wasn't like she was entrusted with major decisions, but even dust would become a mountain if piled together, so if mistakes kept being made...

“Should I visit her later?”

“...Hm, that’s... I’m not sure. She said she wanted to be alone for a while.”

“I see...”

If mother had said so, it was better to follow her wish. As I was telling myself it was probably better like this, I asked with cheerfulness,

“That’s right, about the drink. Could you tell someone I would like to drink tea please?”

Al slightly widened his eyes but after nodding once he replied,

“Understood.”

“Ah, I wonder if I should try the tea Silvia shared with me...”

The tea leaves had been decocted by mother personally. However, I had never received some of it even once. Mother was always eagerly talking with our house’s exclusive gardener in order to mixt several aromatic herbs and medical plants with the tea leaves she’ll brew. It seemed she picked them out so that Silvia could become even the slightest bit healthier. And so, what mother had prepared for Silvia’s sake wasn’t a simple tea.

“I wonder how it tastes...?”

I wondered if my real thought which involuntary slipped through my mouth sounded like I was resentful? I was her real daughter and had a healthy body. There was no need to be watchful over what I ate or drank. It was probably for these reasons that mother had never prepared a special tea for me. She hadn’t done so until now, and she wouldn’t in the future either.

“...Al, there is no need to make such an expression you know?”

My escort was looking at me with wrinkles between his eyebrows, seemingly wanting to say something. But when he was about to, he closed his mouth. And then, he said with a little smile, “...I was told that a merchant who has friendly ties with our house had obtained a rare tea. Next time, I’ll bring it to you.” The “*our house*” he was speaking of must have been his parents’.

“I see, it would be really nice.”

No matter how rare this tea might be, it wouldn’t be hard for me to purchase it directly. If I asked our regular merchant, he would probably immediately make preparations for it. But doing that would have no meaning and he knew it. It was precisely because someone gave it as a gift that it had was special.

The tea mother brewed made Silvia pinch her lips in displeasure at its bitterness. Being allowed to complain about what a mother was doing was also the privilege of a daughter. As such, that child’s attitude wasn’t improper at all, nor was it something to criticize. In a sense, it was the correct reaction. Because as a daughter, it was normal to resist one’s mother sometimes. Besides, it was simply some tea and because it was made by an amateur, normally it would be worthless. Yet, for me it wasn’t just some tea leaves, it wasn’t worthless at all. That’s why, when I received from Silvia the tea mother had decocted, I had to swallow down those envious words, “*That’s so nice.*”

Even though she had chosen the maids attached to me, mother had never worked hard for my sake.

But if it was for Silvia’s, she wouldn’t spare any effort. No matter how busy she was, she would brew tea in every spare moment she could find. I wondered if it was too childish of me to feel jealousy over that fact? That feeling was absolutely no different from what I felt that night, from that envy I felt toward that child who was being embraced while being told, “*You are my lovely little princess.*” As I felt miserable at my lack of growth, I forced myself to make a composed expression.

“I will make the preparations immediately, so please wait in your room.”

I nodded my head at Al who opened the door of my room. He'll probably go call a maid. Looking at the door that had been closed softly, I heaved a sigh. Now that I had become alone, I was assailed by tiredness. I sat down at the chair in front of the dresser and looked at my own face. *If those eyes had been purple. If those hairs had been silver. If this face had been Silvia's face... Then would I also have been loved by everyone?* Such silly thoughts crossed my mind. Even though I thought that there would have been no meaning in living if I hadn't been me, at the same time, I was also thinking that I couldn't live precisely because I was me. When I breathed in, my eyes caught sight of the little bottle Silvia had given me. It was reflecting the faint light inside the room and looked shiny. Was this small bottle also something prepared by mother? It didn't resemble the cheap vials simply used to conserve tea leaves. The glittering glass of seven colors seemed to show it really was an item prepared for a special occasion. When I took it into my hand, I noticed it was unexpectedly heavy. The red ribbon wrapped around it was probably an ornament Silvia had added. When I thought she had wrapped it to give it to me as a gift, I felt a pain in my chest.

"Silvia, has done nothing wrong."

Right, that child isn't bad. I repeated a second time those words I recited as if I was persuading me with a spell. I needed to warn myself that my little sister wasn't wrong. If I didn't do so.....

I lift the bottle and removed the lid for some reason. This drifting fragrance, were there flower petals blended with the tea leaves? Trying to guess what flowers it was I brought it close to my nose. It was a sour and gentle odor. The fragrance that passed through my throat brought me a refreshing feeling as if my whole body and lungs were cleansed up. It made me feel somewhat nostalgic... It was at that moment I felt it. A strange presentiment that made me reflexively distance the bottle from me. A cough escaped my throat involuntary. A second one followed it. They sounded like the cough people would make while sleeping. It sounded like someone else was coughing.

"?"

I looked around meaninglessly. I tried to see if there wasn't some dust whirling in the

air, wondering if there might be a cause to my cough. I moved my line of sight to the window, thinking it might have been left opened and some dust or sand had entered. But like usual, there was nothing of this sort inside the room that had regained its silence. While tilting my head in wonder, I looked once more at the little bottle. It was just an ordinary gift I had received from my cute little sister. I took a breath in, returned my sight to the dresser and breathed out. Soon, the maid will probably bring the tea wagon. Only the sound of the clock ticking away at the passing of time and my own breathing echoed in the room. When I listened carefully to these sounds, it started feeling like I was the only person existing in this world. It was a world where no one but me existed. Maybe, it would be much better like this. A world where I wouldn't be hurt by anyone, and I wouldn't hurt anyone either.

“...A place, where there is no one, hm?”

Then putting it another way, it would be the same as the little room in the brothel I spent one of my past lives. I moved my line of sight to the tips of my fingers. At that moment, I remembered when I fell asleep while holding Crow's hand. *Ah, that's right.* I hadn't been alone there. As I recalled it...

“The drug of that time”

...goose bumps assailed my whole body. The large breath I unconsciously gulped down made a “hic” sound. It almost sounded like I had been frightened by something. *No, that's not it, that's not it,* I told myself as I seized up the bottle once again. Somehow, it felt heavier than earlier.

When I was in the brothel, I was tormented by a dry cough for a long time. I thought it was only a cold and because I left it alone it became a serious illness. A high fever came out, and after a month had passed in the blink of an eye, my condition had worsened to the point I was beyond help. Also, at that time it was impossible to receive any kind of medical treatment. After all, since I had no money to call a doctor, nothing could be done. Therefore, the only thing possible was to lessen the pain. What Crow brought me, was that kind of medicine. However, instead of containing the pain, it was a strong drug that made my consciousness dizzy. *“Never give this drug to a person who ain't afflict with this disease,”* was what said the illegal doctor only invited by the owner of

the brothel to confirm how much time I had left. I didn't even know if his diagnostic was correct, but since even I understood very well the time of my death was drawing near, it was inconsequential. I was told by this doctor, *"For the person afflicted by this disease it's a very good drug but you see, it's too strong, so if a guy who ain't sick take it, it'll cause violent reactions like vertigo, fit of spams and so on. It'll be a big deal!"* He didn't explain what components there were in it and how they worked since I was a prostitute and my consciousness was muddy. Rather, he explained in a way that was easy to understand. Even when I was on the verge of death, some of our guests didn't stop coming to see me. That's probably why he warned me just in case.

The red powder medicine. This was a drug emitting a distinctive scent.

I remembered this smell that was acrid, as if it came from real medicinal plants, but also a little sweet. No, I might have never forgotten it to begin with. Because I so clearly understood what it meant.

Chapter 30

If this is the real end (13)

Continuing to hold the little bottle with my trembling hands, I hesitated on what to do. To restore my breathing that had become swallow, I inhaled deeply. Then I repeated this action several times.

“My lovely little princess.”

Mother had made an expression that seemed to say she couldn't help but to love Silvia so much. I had often seen her hold my little sister in her slender arms. Silvia and I were only born a few months apart. When the mothers were different, naturally, that kind of situation could happen. What had decided our positions as sisters had only been this interval of a few months. I often thought about this when I was a child. I thought about what would have happened if Silvia and I had been in reversed positions. Would have I too, just like Silvia, had my head gently stroked, would I have been embraced, would I have been told *I love you so much I can't help it*.

“Silvia is mother's treasure.”

She probably had never imagined the child she had given birth to was behind the door. Nor that it was slightly open and that her voice would leak out. However, I, who had slipped away from my room because I couldn't help myself from yearning for mother, caught her words clearly. I had been slower than my sister to learn words, my way of talking had been doubtful for a very long time. I knew that I had disappointed my parents. But it wasn't like I didn't understand those words.

.....What about me?

When I was in front of mother, I always thought the same thing. *If Silvia was mother's princess, if she was her treasure, then, “what” on earth was I?*

Staying immobile in the empty corridor, I stared at the appearance of my little sister embraced by mother's arms. That night, because she heard Silvia had a fever again, mother had surely been nursing her. It was past midnight. The mansion was completely silent, I also had been dreaming in my bed, but I had woken up suddenly. It wasn't winter. Yet, it was unusually cold, the empty and pitch-dark room was fostering an incredibly sense of loneliness. The tick tock marking the passage of time echoed, sounding somewhat frightening. I had sneaked away from my room in the middle of the night because I couldn't bear this loneliness, because I wanted to be with someone no matter what. When my feet stuck out from the cloth covering me, a breeze that shouldn't have been blowing indoor made my toes feel cold. Despite this I left my room barefoot. No matter how deep the night was, for security reasons the mansion wasn't completely asleep. Relying on the faint lights burning in the corridor, I proceeded forward.

I was scared.

For the young me, walking down this corridor had been the same as making a journey inside total darkness. Then, after struggling for a while, I saw an unexpectedly strong light. I noticed it was Silvia's room when I heard mother's voice. Her whispering voice sounded especially kind. I had believed this voice would surely rescue me from this irrepressible loneliness.

".....Hm, my lady...?"

Suddenly, a voice resounded close to me, making me freeze. On the other side of the door that was only half-opened, I could see the maid who had brought the tea wagon. She was peeking in the room with only her face passed through the gap, probably because she hadn't get any answer.

"I was told by Alfred-sama that you had returned but when I knocked on the door there was no reply... Since I heard you were feeling unwell, I thought that perhaps something had happened so... I am aware it was very rude of me but I took the liberty to open the door."

"No, it is alright. Thank you."

When I said that, the maid heaved a relieved sigh. She had probably judged it was an emergency so she decided to open the door but depending on the situation her behavior might not have been excused. She would naturally have received a rebuke from the steward and if it had been the room of the head of the house she might even have been dismissed.

“More important, I have a request.”

“Yes, what can I do for you?”

“Could you call the person in charge of cleaning? The person managing the keys would also be enough.”

“The person managing the keys?”

“Yes.”

Even though she made a doubtful expression, she had to obey her master’s order. Despite her confusion, she exited the room. Even now my trembling hands were tightly grabbing the vial. I had thrust it in the pocket of my robe. It would be great if my fear was for nothing. Yes, I’m sure it was only my imagination.

But, last week, my little sister had certainly had a fever. And then, just a bit before that, she had collapsed due to dizziness. At that time her illness hadn’t be grave enough to make her lose consciousness, the doctor who examined her also judged that it wasn’t a serious matter so it didn’t become a big uproar but...”...*Sometimes, I feel strange*” I recalled the words Silvia had muttered. She seemed uneasy, but she originally had a weak constitution so it wasn’t the first time this happened. Since long ago, her face would suddenly lose all colors in a few seconds even though she had looked fine just a while ago. I heard her dizziness and a sort of buzzing sounds she heard in her ears came from anemia. They were only small inconveniences so in theory, if she was careful with her diet, her condition should improve. That’s why this time too I thought it was the same as usual. She wasn’t in a dreadful state suffering of a high fever, assailed by a fit of cough, or afflicted with rash. Because these kinds of symptoms which were prior to the worsening of her illness hadn’t appeared, I had thought there was no need to worry too much. In fact, the doctor had concluded with a wry smile that rather than being caused by a worsening of her illness, her dizziness must have

come from the fatigue that had probably piled up because she wasn't use to the school life.

My littler sister had laughed, saying she was relieved to hear that. She added she was glad it wasn't a strange disease. Her face that seemed to be made from delicate glass limply collapsed, looking lovely. That's the only impression I had of that event.

I wondered what kind of expression mother was making at that time?

".....My lady, the person in charge of cleaning has arrived."

Along with a reserved knocking sound, the maid from earlier appeared. Behind her, I saw a young girl who looked obviously flustered. But the person in charge of the keys should have been someone much older. That doubt and surprise probably appeared on my face.

"Currently, the manager is tied up by an urgent business and consequently couldn't come here."

As the maid explained this, she pushed the back of the younger servant. 'I-I'm, I went to look for the keys. I have been asked to deliver them personally without fail to you my lady.' Usually this maid had no other contact with me than passing by each other in the corridors. But truth to be told, even this was quite unusual. These maids displayed their real abilities precisely when their masters weren't present. That's why the time they were on duty was inevitably very early on the morning and during the day time when my parents were confined in their office. I was also taking my lunch in the academy, so there were few chances of meeting them. And then, even if we had may occasion to see each other, we still probably wouldn't become close. That's how things had been, ever since that time in the past when that maid I got along well with had been dismissed.

However, Silvia who had spent a long time confined in this estate to recuperate, was different from me. Because she took walks inside the mansion in order to move her body, she had met them on many instances and as such, she seemed to be getting along well with them. This was something that had never changed until now. Sometimes, I

saw Silvia and the maids laughing together. Her figure overlapped with the young me. I remembered having happily come in contact with someone, like how my sister was doing. But that person was no longer here. There was me, who had been taught to not interact more closely than necessary with the servant, and Silvia who hadn't. I thought over what that boundary between us could possibly be...

"Hm, my lady..."

When I opened the palm of my hand to receive the keys, the maids called out to me in an apologetic voice.

"Yes?"

"This... must be reported to the master."

"..."

Precisely because she thought I was up to something, she said that to remind me of this fact. Also, the reason she purposely said it like this was because the steward must have already been notified.

"I do not mind."

I tightly grasped the bunch of keys and looked at her in the eyes. Among those keys were the ones for the office and the archives or the treasure warehouse, in other words for rooms needing father's permission to enter. Since the rooms we usually didn't go to were locked, the person in charge of cleaning was managing the keys, but it didn't mean that anybody could use them. However, it was true that with only those keys, you could trespass in most of the rooms. When you thought about them, the idea someone might try to use the keys to commit an evil deed would always come to mind. The steward was also probably concerned about this. In other words, I wasn't trusted.

"All the things I will do from now on, I do not mind if you report it to your supervisors."

After declaring this, I bypassed the servant who was clearly shaking. “My lady...?” Not minding her small voice that was unable to hide her distrust, I left the room. “Please, wait lady...!” I shook off the maid who was trying to guess the reasons why I needed the keys from my actions and expressions. She couldn’t ask directly because ultimately, I was the daughter of her employer. But if she didn’t present me the keys, I only had to order her to. While feeling the presence of the maid and the servant who were chasing after me, I proceeded down the corridor. Each time I stepped forward, my heart trembled. My vision became blurred, not because tears were flowing, but rather due to tiredness. Yes, it was surely that. Yet, it felt as if my heart and my body had become two separated entities and my feet tangled several times.

If this was a dream, and if I then woke up from it, I might laugh. Laugh that such an absurd reality could never be true.

Even though the sun hadn’t set yet, the long, long straight corridor seemed very dim. It was still brighter than that time in my childhood when I walked alone in the middle of the night. Yet, the scene looked very similar to that time. It might be natural since it was the same place. I put my hands in front of my chest and pressed them tightly, then I moved my line of sight from right to left, vividly remembering how I had walked down this corridor as if I was running away from something. At that time, my fingers were trembling. Startled by the projection of my own shadow casted by the faintly glowing lamps, my shoulders shook. Still, I had eagerly proceeded forward. There was no help at the place I arrived to, yet it was still true that the unchanging scene had brought me reassurance. Silvia and mother never changed. No matter what happened to me, no matter how the world changed, they would remain unperturbed and continued to live their life as if nothing was different from the previous day. The reason I didn’t leap into the room was because I had been afraid my own existence would end up changing their usual days into “unusual” ones. I knew that I always had to be “me.” Straitening my back, being unafraid of anyone, phased by nothing, at any time I had to confront everything with a firm attitude. Something like clinging to mother’s hand mustn’t be done.

“M-my lady! Silvia-sama is not present!”

The maid called out to me with a small voice when I used the bunch of keys in front of Silvia’s room. As she was an employee, even if she had realized what I intended to do,

she still couldn't protest directly. Since she was a servant, she couldn't snatch the keys from my hands. I strongly stared at the face of the frightened maid who kept inhaling small breaths. That Silvia wasn't here, I was fully aware of that fact.

"If you remain here with me, you might also get reprimanded. So."

You should get away from this place, I warned them, moving my gaze to the servant who was standing a few steps away from us. "...N-no, I am..." The servant was shaking her head frantically, surely because she had been told to observe and report all my actions. As she was even younger than Silvia, she probably had no rights to refuse this order. To say nothing of stopping the daughter of her master if she was trying to do something. The fact a young servant had purposely been chosen to be sent here wasn't because they were short on hands. It was done in order to have a sacrificial pawn when push came to shove. Her age as well as the fact her face wasn't familiar showed she was a person who had been hired recently. In other words, it didn't seem she had been entrusted with an important duty. As such, if "something were to happen to her," even if she was no longer in the estate it wouldn't be a hard blow for the other employees. If I were to make a mess and do something unbelievable, after having reported it, her mouth would probably be sealed.

She had naturally not notice this. However, she and I were living in that kind of world.

I averted my gaze from the servant who was looking at me without hiding her bewilderment. Had it been a usual day, I might have retrieved my hand and returned to my room. I would have given back the key pretending that nothing was wrong, said a few words of apology to the steward, "I am sorry for taking up a bit of your time," and that's all it would have taken to end this. Because nothing had happened yet, making up an explanation would also have been unnecessary. Despite understanding all this...

"My lady...!"

I certainly heard the maid's voice full of reproach. Still, I opened the door without caring about it.

“Where is stored the tea Silvia received from mother?”

While I told them it was fine to leave this place, when I asked this question to the maid, she reluctantly followed after me. Then, after slightly hesitating, she looked at the bedside. At that place, there was a large chest decorated with exquisite carvings and on top of it, stuffed toys and dolls of various sizes were lined up. They were all things our parents had bought for Silvia. To not let that child who often couldn't leave her bed feel lonely, toys of countless sizes had been gathered, ranging from the ones that were perfect to hug to the ones only meant to be admired. And they were all handed over directly to Silvia by father and mother.

Even I had possessed a few of these. However, the way they were given to me was different from how Silvia received hers. The merchant who was trading with our house had told me, “Your respected mother had asked us to present this to my lady,” adding words that might or might not have been true, politely deposing in front of me the wrapped plush toys. Now, those pitiable dolls were shut down in a closet in the inner part of my room. Because they stared at my face with eyes that seemed excessively reproachful, I couldn't hug them not even once.

“M-my lady!”

Without hesitation, when I opened the drawer of the chest decorated with dolls, glass vials leaned up regularly inside a square box appeared in front of my eyes. The tea leaves were probably inside this drawer so that Silvia could gaze at them to pass time. The glass bottles which were subtly changing colors were sparkling like jewels. When I picked one, the cold feeling made my hand shake. These bottles weren't adorned by anything. As I thought, the one Silvia gave to me had been decorated with a ribbon on purpose, I was now certain of it. When I opened the lid, a sweet aroma gently drifted out.

“.....Ah, why...?”

Probably no one heard my muttering voice. Taking all of the eight vials contained in the little box, I checked them one by one. The medical herbs mixed with the tea seemed

a bit different. But the odor remaining in my nose was the same. The shaking that had seized me since some time ago wouldn't stop. "...My lady?" My unusual condition was probably noticed. The maid peered at me with a doubtful expression.

Each time I blinked, the thing I remembered was the face of mother as she was hugging my little sister. She always seemed happy when she gazed at that child's face who was nestling her cheek close to her. This appearance would never let you imagine she was bearing a grudge or hating someone.

"...Why?"

These small arms tightly hugged mother's neck. Because she was young, she didn't know how to restrain her strength. But, mother hadn't said anything, instead she had smiled broadly, seeming very glad. I could hear my little sister's voice as she laughed, declaring, "Mother, I love you."

"...Why? Why?... How come.....!"

My lips trembled. My teeth made a clanging sound because my whole body was shaking. I didn't know if I was sorrowful, if it was heart-breaking nor why it was so painful.

But I couldn't help but cry out loud. During all that meaningless time I had kept repeating over and over again, there had been nothing I could believe in unconditionally, but I had never doubt once the affection mother had toward Silvia. I envied it. I couldn't stop myself from yearning for it. I had never known that kind of earnest and pure love devoid of scheme and trick, a love that wasn't granted as a reward for accomplishing something. Even in that pitch-black world, at least one thing like this had existed. And that had been a light strong enough to burn my eyes, a deep affection I would never forget even if I closed them.

That's why I had never been able to stop wishing for something like this.

"My lady! Ilya-sama! You mustn't...!"

The maid who finally realized the gravity of the matter exclaimed in a loud voice. I vigorously shook off her hands as she tried to grasp my arms and peeled off the sheet of Silvia's bed. Then I spread it on the ground. From the drawer I took out the box that was used to store the vials and turned it upside down over the sheet. The glass that tumbled down made an unexpected loud sound as they collided against each other. The concentration of the gentle and sweet smell inside the room increased. I thought there might even have been hibiscus inside.

"M-my lady! What on earth are you doing? These, these, these are Silvia-sama's belongings!"

I pushed aside the maid who had shifted her body to obstruct my path, trying to prevent me from holding the vials I had wrapped up in the sheet. Standing a few steps away, the servant girl responsible for the keys seemed to intend to prevent me from leaving the room despite her teary eyes. The door was shut down by the girl, raising a fierce sound. After standing still for a moment, stupefied, I strongly pressed down the bottles I was holding in my hand against my chest. When I tightly closed my eyes, something overflowed from the corner of my eyes.

Once I leave this room, I won't be able to go back.

What was reflected inside this pitch-dark world was mother's thin fingers and Silvia's silver hairs. The color of her hairs was lighter in her childhood than now, they were closer to white. That child who had hairs of my favorite color, mother had stroked her gently. Again and again. As if to say she couldn't help it because she was too lovely, because she loved her too much. I hadn't seen this scene just one or twice. *If it had been me instead... I wonder how happy and blessed I would feel*, was what I often thought.

"Step aside."

"M-my lady!"

"Will you make me repeat the same thing twice?"

“But, my lady.....!”

“I said, move aside!!”

When I rose my voice, as if it was acting in concert, my heart pounded. It might have been because I had screamed so loudly. As my eyes were wide opened, the maid gazing at me in wonder and the servant shaking of anxiety were clearly reflected. When I confronted them by scowling at them, they faltered slightly and a gap opened. Thrusting forward my thin body, I left the room.

Feeling as if I was a robber breaking out of a house, once I exited in the corridor I exhaled a deep breath. Even though there was no one here, I breathed out silently like I was making sure no one would hear me, but my crying voice let out a noisy shivering sound. The two of them didn't seem to have followed after me. They had surely run off to report to the steward. During this interval, I must get away from Silvia's room even if it's only a little. As I quickened my pace, my breathing accelerated accordingly. Why did I unconsciously grasp my throat? The anguish increased, it didn't make me feel more comfortable. The straight-line corridor where carpets were spread out seemed to become complicated like a sloppy maze. Each time I stepped forth, I was assailed by the illusion the weight of my body pulled me down.

.....I'm scared. Scared. Someone. Anyone.

Once I finally reached my destination, I breathed in and out two times. Pushing the door without knocking, I saw a thin back sat on a rocking chair. Even though her back was facing me, she probably noticed the sound of the door which echoed in a clang. Tilting her neck with her eyebrows slightly creased, she slowly turned her head.

“.....Ilya?”

When our eyes met and I saw her puzzled expression, my arms started trembling without reason. The bedsheet I was holding fell down, the few vials inside it rolled out. Lightly rolling, they lost their momentum when they reached the feet of mother who had stood up before I noticed, reflecting the light of the sun that was coming from the window.

While I was squinting my eyes due to the dazzling reflection, the sound of rustling clothes resounded. I simply watched as mother picked up a vial with her slender fingers. As if she was checking something, she made the bottle containing the tea leaves roll in the palm of her hand several times, then mother rose her face to gaze at me fixedly. Then, moving down her eyes as if tracing their contours, she seemed to recognize the other vials lying at her feet. For some reason, her mouth floated a little smile. She was neither upset, marveling, nor angry. It was a smile in which you couldn't read the slightest emotion.

That kind of expression, I knew it very well.

Chapter 31

If this is the real end (14)

You see, the persons who have given up everything and abandoned all hope, become skillful at smiling you know? Crow had said. Whether it's joy or sorrow, or even pain, when all emotions are sealed off in the depth of their heart, their face don't lose their expressions..... They smile.

"At time when nothing can no longer be done and all is helpless, humans who have "given up" everything will smile, you see."

The sun had started to set. Turning her back to the rim of the window which had been dyed red by the light, mother took one, two steps toward me. It was a lady-like way of walking, a way that didn't produce any sound. Even at a moment like this, mother didn't forget her manner as a noble. I ended up feeling admiration in front of her excellence, despite the strangeness of the situation. Her facial features weren't gaudy, her back was stretched upright, she was moving with a feminine bearing that made it hard to take your eyes away from even the tip of her fingers. She wasn't a beautiful woman to the point of being breathtaking, but the refinement of her behavior drew in people's eyes. However, for a woman belonging to the nobility, such a thing was common. The people wearing items of high value, somehow or another their attitude and gestures, and even the way they phrased their words, was different from others. This was because from a young age, the being called a noble would undertake a different education from the common populace; in the first place their foundations were different. There probably must have been trivial differences depending on the person, but they certainly wouldn't be big ones. In other words, aristocrats were originally beings who would stand out even if they didn't do anything. Even someone like me was probably not different in that aspect. Even dressed soberly, I would still appear like someone from a noble family and I would stand out if I were to walk in the downtown. Because both the fabric of the dress and the way it had been weaved and seamed showed it was made by a dexterous craftsman, naturally it looked different from a cheap one. The people whose eyes could discern such a thing were unexpectedly numerous. Moreover, in most cases, I would be accompanied by a maid

or a butler, and just this would be conspicuous enough to gather all eyes on me.

However, this would only apply to when I went downtown, I understood it didn't represent how I was assessed as a person myself. In one of my lives, at the time I was sold in a human traffic, nobody had believed I was a noble. If what I wore, my hair style and the environment I was placed in were different, in the blink of an eyes the frame making me a noblewoman would get out of place. I was such a person, if I was surrounded by nobles I would be buried out; that demonstrated that in reality I would not remain in anyone's eyes.

Put in that sense, maybe mother and I were similar. However at the same time, it was also a fact there was an overwhelming difference between us. If the both of us lined up next to each other, the one who would be told she was beautiful would probably be mother. Since we were related by blood our facial features should have had some resemblances, yet I was only a mediocre person to the bitter end while nonetheless, mother was beautiful. In addition, the atmosphere we emitted itself was greatly different. Mother simply appeared nothing but cheerful, gentle and seemed to have an air of composure. That comfortable atmosphere which could wrapped up around everyone and anyone was certainly characteristic of a noble. Anyone would appraise it like this, even I had always thought so.

Even now, she was excessively composed, she didn't seem to be shaken at all.

"Ilya, why did you do this?"

On the contrary, her voice was even calmer than usual. I promptly diverted my line of sight, but it was not out of guilt. Because mother was intensely staring straight at my face, I had simply faltered due to the strength of that gaze.

I wondered if mother was trying to appeal something to me with that intense gaze.

"They are from, Silvia's room..."

"Did you take them without permission?"

When I was hesitating to speak up, mother uttered so without delay. "You cannot do

this.” *You mustn’t do such a thing*, she added with a trouble expression, as if she was complaining to a child. It wasn’t an angry tone, nor was it blaming me, it was merely a way of speaking full of fondness and affection, but that made my heart tremble. Even when I was a child, she never talked to me with that kind of tone. Because from the time I became Soleil’s fiancé, guiding me had been the role of the maids. And so in this way, I had never been warned or reprimanded directly like this. It sounded almost as if we were a normal pair of mother and daughter.

“If I’m not wrong, these are items that child cherishes.”

The furnitures arranged inside the room were of splendid textures worthy of the wife of an earl, but there weren’t many of them. She would dress up when she was invited to an evening party, but ordinarily she dressed modestly and this room reflected mother’s preference. Even though there were several vials on the carpet, the scene looked like an ordinary day when a daughter had come pay a courtesy visit and was welcomed by her mother, appearing as if nothing was wrong. But I recalled we didn’t have that kind of relationship. When nothing was wrong, we wouldn’t spend time together, it never happened.

“Mother, what on earth are they...?”

My trembling voice echoed in the silent room. It didn’t sound very reliable, even in my own ears it seemed to echo from far away. However, the person in front of my eyes appeared to have heard it clearly and bent her head a little while smiling softly. Despite being a gentle gaze, it felt uncomfortable, as if I was being observed. When I was stared at by those eyes, I would always need to harden myself and decide on what I wanted to say. The reason I reacted like this was because for me, “mother” wasn’t an unconditional ally.

Since the time my first life ended, an invisible wall had stood between my parents and me. No, I might have been the only one who felt this. However, it didn’t necessary become a problem. Since they so quickly abandoned their daughter restrained in chains, it wasn’t surprising I could no longer believe in their love. That’s what I personally thought. I even started doubting whether maybe, far from love, they had any feelings at all toward me. Even at the time the government official read aloud the

charges against me, I was alone. Following the formal procedure, when he asked if anyone had an objection, I remembered having shouted it was a false charge. In that place where I had no allies, I merely repeated it again and again. As for my father, he had given up on me a long, long time ago.

I remembered that mother came to see me only one time. But it wasn't to lament that her daughter had been falsely accused, or to advocate my innocence, she only came to make her farewell.

It happened the day the verdict was handed down, the day I was imprisoned. I was put into a carriage that had been transformed into an iron cage, ready to be carried in the dungeon where the most sinful men among all the criminals were sequestered. There, mother appeared alone, not even accompanied by an attendant. Since it had meaning as a warning and a spectacle, the day I was imprisoned, many ordinary citizens gathered. As they were in an excited state, no one noticed an aristocrat woman was standing here. She had slipped among the curious onlookers and was looking at me. Because I thought our eyes had met, I hoped that maybe, she had come to save me, and I stretched out my arm through the gap of the iron grid. My legs tied up in iron chains badly hurt, but I couldn't care less. I complained I was innocent, cried, screamed and shout. But mother quickly turned away and left that place. Seeing her resolute and firm back that was the same as usual, I fully realized I was forsook. Without any despair, without any sadness, in fact without any emotion she abandoned me. When her daughter grasped the sturdy iron grid, when she left behind her daughter who kept screaming *don't go*, I wondered what mother felt?

"What they are? Simply some medicinal tea."

I wasn't foolish enough to not notice that mother's gentle smile had deepened. She made the same expression than a young child who had his precious toy or a hidden treasure confiscated. However, there was no sadness or anger in it. She had a quite strange look that was a mix of perplexity and joy. I felt that mother's emotions were awfully honest. Because she always conducted herself as a perfect lady.

"...Are you aware of what is inside?"

When she picked up the bottle at her feet, mother sighed and whispered,

“Why do you think I don’t know? Since after all, it was made by me?”

Hearing her tone of voice that sound like she was thoroughly perplexed, a chill suddenly run down my spine. Before completely losing its light, the sun cried. For some reason, my line of sight shift to the scenery outside the window. Mother’s room, which had a good exposure to the sun as it was in a high location inside the mansion, was still bright even now when the sun was setting. When I looked at my own shadow near my feet, at its extremity another one had drawn near.

“You are such a foolish child, Ilya.”

Since the time I was appointed as Soleil’s fiancé, I also probably became a stranger for her. That’s why she won’t use abusive language or insult me, she’ll play it nice just like how she did now. She never released the sense of distance, a sort of reserve, that existed between us. I reflexively rose my head and saw mother whispered, “Really, such a silly child.” A gentle and cheerful smile was floating on her face. It looked full of affection, like always..... that’s what other people would have thought if they had seen it.

“...Why?”

Even though I ought to question her directly, my voice faintly trembled and the air stayed stuck in my mouth. I was still wavering, thinking I should not ask her, because I didn’t want to believe. That mother, that my mother had...

“To Silvia, what on earth... did you...?”

Each time I spited out words, it felt like I’ve run out of oxygen. The breath I sucked up as if I was panting in anguish produced a loud noise. *It’s wrong, it’s wrong, it’s wrong.*

I mustn't ask about it. Such a thing is impossible, someone screamed inside my head.

"Don't you already understand, Ilya? What I did?"

You know, right? Mother who was completely composed and was looking at me with calm eyes didn't seem to understand her own sin. Besides, it's hard to think that mother... that my one and only wise mother had made a mistake of her own initiative. The overwhelming silence coiled around my skin, as if it was slowly pressuring me. My feet which were supporting my body about to fall were not stepping on the soft carpet but on a rough and undulating mass of sand. If I were to take one step forward, I would certainly fall.

"Please, do not misunderstand, Ilya. It's not that I do not love that child you see."

It was a kind voice. Its tone didn't shake, yet it sounded like a gentle and fleeting voice. It made me recall the lullaby mother had sung, a long time ago. As she whispered so softly, the words that fell off her lips seemed to melt and disappear in the twinkle of an eyes. The pupils gazing at me were of the color of new green leaves that had no impurity, that had not been tarnished by mud. It was the color I had yearned for so much in the past. Because I have always thought that mother's eyes were similar to the leaves overflowing with vitality, the green leaves shining under the midsummer sun. If my eyes hadn't been of that dry color of dead leaves about to fall on the ground, if they had been like mother's unsoiled fresh green... I would probably have been proud of my eyes.

Nonetheless, those eyes which weren't beautiful, those eyes alone were the proof of the relation of parent and child between mother and me. My faded green, and mother's deep green. Colors that Silvia who had a different mother didn't possess. The color that only I had inherited, mother's color. The amber that was spread inside them, father's color, was also here. Yes, it was the colors of our parents only I had both inherited... and yet.....

"If you truly love her, then why did you do this? What on earth is mixed inside this? This is, these tea leaves, what is different from normal ones? Isn't something,

something that is bad for Silvia, mixed in it?”

If I didn't settle this soon, Silvia will come back home. I suddenly came to my senses and drew close to mother. Now that I thought of it, I wondered what happened to the maid and the servant who should have gone report to the steward. If he was already aware of the situation, then it's only a question of time until it would reach father's ears..... But, no one knew yet that something was put inside the tea mother prepared for Silvia. As such, what they would be worried about now wasn't this. The problem was that I had took something from Silvia's room. My father who doted on Silvia will surely not overlook this.

“Silvia originally had a weak constitution. To think that inside these, something, I do not know what, is mixed in...”

The drug I took when I was in the brothel was for suppressing my illness, it put a burden on the body itself. It was a very specific medicine that was still been in the research phase and it shouldn't have appeared on the town market yet. Although it was expensive, this medicine I had obtained wasn't something that only attacked the disease, it had effects on the health of the internal organs too. Still, as it allowed me to ward off an immediate death, I relied on it. As for whether that medicine had been put inside the tea mother had prepared for Silvia... I wasn't convinced. So, if maybe, per some chance, it was something else that had a similar scent...

“Mother, what on earth, were you,”

What on earth were you thinking? In front of mother's smile, these words that should have close the sentence were prevented from being enounced..... Even though I wished she would deny it. Mother's reaction was to overturn everything entirely.

“It is not poison.”

Instead of screaming, “*then what the hell is it?*” my throat was blocked and I had to

gulp down.

“So, she won’t die. That’s what worried you, right?”

She said, as she walked toward the dresser. As she seemed to look into the mirror, mother whispered with the same gentle voice, “...But that child is...” Our eyes met through the mirror. Both reflected in there, mother’s face and my face completely looked like two different persons. That I had thought we looked alike, might only had been my own delusion. *A dream brought forth by my wish, a meaningless dream*, I thought, and my lips started to tremble.

“That child is my precious, very precious princess, Ilya.”

Even though she didn’t ask me to, I nodded my head to acknowledge her remark. Seeing this, mother said something I quite didn’t understand, “If you knew, then why?” I was aware this was illogical, yet I felt like one by one her words were heading toward the same direction.

“She should not have gone to the academy, Ilya. That child is not good.”

“...Not good?”

“That child, that child is hopeless.”

“...N, no! That is not true. That is certainly not true! Silvia is, doing her best.”

I could never have imagined mother had such a low evaluation of Silvia and I ended up unconsciously raising my voice. For mother to have said such a thing... But mother didn’t show any reaction and continued to stare at the mirror. A few minutes had passed since earlier and the sun had continued to set, so the light flowing through the window was weakening. Due to this, the room had become much dimmer compared to before. And so because of this, I couldn’t read her expression after she had lowered her face.

“That’s not it, Ilya. It’s wrong, it is not about that.”

Mother suddenly straightened herself and looked over her shoulder.

“I have a promise I must fulfill. This, my husband is, that child’s loveliness...”

Falling gently, as if they were dancing on a flower’s petals, tears overflow from mother’s eyes.

“When you proposed to let Silvia attend the academy because it would be better for her, I should have opposed more. But the reason I didn’t was because I thought that my husband... would never give his permission. And yet, that child... because Silvia solicited him with all her might... he was moved by his affection.”

Even though I was sure he would not allow it, whispered mother as a long sigh leaked out of her lips.

“What are you talking about?”

Mother’s eyes were swinging left and right, she should have been looking at me, and yet I noticed she seemed to be gazing into something in the distance. Such a vacant gaze was dangerous.

“.....I won’t say I didn’t intend to do such a thing. I’m clearly aware. Of what I did, and also, of what I ought to do. But.”

“M-mother...?”

“My husband will never forgive me. After all, I made our princess drink such a thing.”

“Mother.”

It was like she was speaking to herself, if you only listened to her words, you could interpret it as a confession. But, her face didn't show the slightest trace of repentance. If I must describe it, her expression might have been close to the feeling of emptiness you would experience after everything you accomplished or attempted to do finished.

“Since she started attending school, that child became energetic. Yes, a lot livelier than before.”

Wasn't it a good thing? Certainly, compared to the past, Silvia had become a lot more active. There were still moments when her condition would worsen, but if this was the effects of the tea prepared by mother... then she might have truly become energetic and healthy. I thought so because that child was doing her best to continue going to school.

“But that's not good, then. That situation, that broken child. It mustn't become like this.”

After saying this in a whispering voice, mother abruptly grasped the air with her right hand. Because of this sudden gesture, for a second I put myself on guard and from the edge of my field of vision, I caught glimpse of a flitting silver color. But I was unable to react and stood still. My lips did move to try and say something like, *Don't* or *Wait*, but they made no sound. The words inside my mouth that lost their place to go were brought to a standstill and blocked my throat. I only blinked once, but taking advantage of that gap a black lump flew off with a frightening momentum. My eyes moved to follow it, but because it was too far away they couldn't catch up.

Something felt on my cheek.

I thought a fly had land on it. I reflexively touched it with my right hand and felt something with my fingers. While I knitted my brows because I felt something lukewarm, when I moved my line of sight to confirm what it was, mother's delicate body fell with a thud.

Ah, right. More important that's what on my cheek, what happened to mother.....?

I couldn't comprehend what happened. Even though my eyes had certainly seen it all. My line of sight moved to mother's fallen body, then once again, I looked at my own hand. As I looked alternatively at my fingers dyed in red and mother's unmoving body, my feet stepped forth. But the bottom of my feet didn't transmit any feeling. As if the ground had collapsed and I had fallen in a hole, as if in one instant, I had lost sight of the place where I was. Because my field of vision was trembling greatly, I thought the mansion was crumbling down. While telling myself it couldn't be the case, I strongly closed my eyes, and I opened them once again. Then I looked around to confirm the state of the walls and the ceiling, and realized nothing had happened to the estate itself. Just after this, I understood it was myself who was falling. Even though I wasn't injured, something, was strange. "...m-mother...?" While supporting my body with both hands, I crawled and approached mother who was lying on the extravagant woven carpet. In deep crimson and pale orange, flowers of various size were blooming on it. These complex patterns were suitable to ornate the feet of nobles.

Mother's blood was quickly dying it entirely.

"Mo... ther"

My breathing accelerated, I couldn't inhale well. So it was obvious I could not exhale properly and a dry voice leak out of my mouth. *Why should I do at a time like this?* I thought but my legs refused to move and I couldn't stand up. Using my elbows, I continued to advance forward on the carpet. My sleeves coiled around my body and weight me down, it was a big hindrance, and my body that had become heavy like lead refused to move like I wanted. But my mind was rushing me to hurry.

"...W-why... did you do... why do that... mother..."

While she tightly grasped the knife she had slit her own neck with, mother stared at me with a dispirited gaze. I didn't know if she was still conscious or not. From her neck, blood continued to flow out without stopping.

Desperate, I finally reached mother's side and pressed down on her neck. But, my

hands couldn't stop the blood, the red liquid was still leaking out of my fingers. At that moment, mother's thin fingers moved without strength and seized my wrist. I thought she only wanted me to stay by her side, but I strongly repressed this feeling. When I faltered for a second,

"I'm so-rry, Ilya..."

The green eyes on which a shadow had fallen, were fixed on my face.

"...Sorry... Ilya....."

After having uttered so in a relaxed tone like she was talking to a friend, she strongly grasped my wrist. "Pull yourself together, mother, everything is going to be alright." Like I did when I was a child, I kept repeating, *it's alright, it's going to be alright*. "Mother, mother, it's fine, you'll be fine, so." Even though I knew nothing was alright at all, yet, I could only say those words. Looking at my imploring expression, mother's eyes opened wide in surprise. And then, still making that astonished expression, she heaved one long sigh.

"Mother?"

Her pupils were opened and light was rapidly scattering.

"...Mother, mother... m-mother, mother..."

No, stop, what, why.

"No, no, no... That, that, I don't want... someone."

Mother's hand that was grasping my arm fell on the carpet. With my hand that had

become free, I pressed down on the wound that had worsen compared to before, but it was useless. I thought I should press down with some cloth, but there was nothing nearby and I mustn't loosen my hands.

"Someone, anyone, come, someone!"

Even though I wanted to scream, my breathing stopped and the words didn't form. I was useless. Irremediably useless. Even at a time like this, I couldn't do anything, not even raise my voice and shout out for help.

"Mother! Mother!"

I called out to her, but there already wasn't any response. Her hollow eyes which had completely lost their light, weren't reflecting anything.

".....Come back, don't go... please... mother...! Not again... don't... leave me behind again..."

No, in such a place, don't leave me in such a place. In the gaps between my disordered breathing, I supplicated her, but mother was no longer seen me.

Like always, she would not look back.

Chapter 32

If this is the real end (15)

I received with resignation the shock that run along my cheek. My thoughts were in a haze, I couldn't think of even one decent thing. When I raised my face blank in amazement, father was standing there with a grim expression. I understood I had been slapped, but even so, I wasn't even feeling surprised. Confronted to this reality, my emotions couldn't catch up.



Still hugging the body of mother who had ceased to breath, I continued to call out without stopping, and the first one to rush in the room was the steward. Then, after having lost his words for a second when confronted to the disaster inside the room, he called other people. His very loud voice made the air inside the dead silent room vibrate. It was the first time I saw the old steward who was always calm and collect, whose thoughts I could never guess, be shaken like this. But I, on the contrary, in such a situation, I was watching everything unfold as if I was an unconcerned stranger. I was strongly pressing down to stop the blood that was still flowing out in the meantime. The palms of my hands *were* laying on mother's slender neck, yet the blood didn't stop. From those hands, little by little her life was spilling out and I couldn't hold it back.

There was no way to stop it. Mother's breathing had already stopped, she surely will never open her eyes again. Then why, was there a need for her to lose even more blood?

God, god, god, why? Why?

When I reflexively looked down because an unpleasant feeling seized me, like something was crawling up to my knees, I noticed I was sitting in the middle of a pond of blood. From the tip of my fingers, from the tips of my toes, from the hem of my skirt, from my sleeves, everything seemed to have slowly been soaked and dyed by mother's red. Soon, my body started to shaken and clatter, and my arms lost their strength. I had a feeling I said something, but I also felt like I was unable to utter the slightest

word. It felt like I had been crying with a very loud voice, almost as if I would split open my throat. But I think that maybe, in reality I might have been completely unable to make a sound. Even though my arms and cloth dyed in red should be the proofs of the event that occurred earlier, everything was fuzzy. My blurred vision wouldn't return to normal, it became the same sensation as if I was having a nightmare.

However, I remembered that someone had grasped my arms which were clinging to mother's completely unmoving body.

She has already gone, said a gentle voice to persuade me. *It is enough now, it is fine*. Unable to understand the meaning of these words I shook my head and my shout echoed repeatedly, "She is not dead yet."

.....No, that's not it. The one who said that, might not have been me.

I was forcefully torn off mother, or possibly, I let myself be pulled away, and I tumbled on the carpet. I understood that the person who had seized me had not done that on purpose. I just could not stand up. You could say it wasn't the time to take a passive stance. When I scolded my shaking legs and stood up, I saw the chamberlain standing beside mother's lying body. It was just like the figure of a holy knight surrounding the sleeping holy mother. This scene almost looked like he was guarding mother from me.

Then, I was driven out from the room.

In front of mother's room, standing with an imposing stance, the steward was fulfilling his duty as the gatekeeper, preventing anyone from entering inside. No, maybe, he might have stand on guard against me who stood dead still in the corridor. I was told, *You mustn't move from that place*, but to begin with, I didn't have the energy and willpower to move and I staggered until my back rested on the wall. Because if I didn't do that, I would have collapsed immediately. It might have been better if I could directly faint. My legs and hands were continuing to shake, my teeth clashed against each other and clattered, I was tormented my anxiety and loneliness, as if I had been thrown out to a frozen field during a blizzard. Each time I blinked, what I saw on the other side of this darkness that visit me, was the face of mother who had stopped breathing but was intensely staring at me. Then, inside my ears, I heard the sound of her respiration. *Huff*, like a huge inspiration taken before screaming something. Unconsciously, I strained my ears to listen carefully, wondering if she was about to tell me something. But, that was all. Staying like this, swallowing down everything, she stopped living.

“...Why, how come...? Why, this, why...?”

I wondered how much time passed? My father who had apparently finished his work and come back passed in front of me without stopping. Then, he entered inside mother's room, and came out within a few minutes. When he had entered, a dignified servant had opened the door for him, but when he exited, he vigorously swung open the door himself. Then as soon as he saw me, he rose his right hand. He didn't even ask for an explanation. He just hit me. From the start, my standing wasn't particularly firm so my already slanted body was easily thrown on the hard floor. But I didn't feel any pain or emotions at all. I tried to get up by prompting my body with my hands but my upper body couldn't be lifted. As if they had coagulated, my joints only made a grinding and unreliable sound. My vision was blurred, not because tears were overflowing, but probably because mother's spur of blood was stuck to my eyelids. I tried to touch and feel my face, but the sensation was different from usual. This strange sensation must have been the proof mother's scattered blood had dried. reflexively, my hands closed tightly in a fist and rubbed my cheek. *It doesn't come off, it doesn't come off, I cannot remove it.* Mother's blood was clinging, on my face.

“*You.* What did you do, what did you do to your mother?”

I thought I hadn't hear this voice since quite a while. To the point I couldn't remember when was the last time. That voice was accompanied by a nostalgic plaintiveness, a strange tone I heard for the first time. Even though my father had hit his daughter hard, he nevertheless wasn't enraged. Or maybe, he was concealing his wrath, but on his face at least, there wasn't the slightest hint of emotions; you couldn't surmise what he was currently feeling. I began to feel an uncomfortable feeling on my cheek but I knew this person had held back. Although he had retired due to an injury, he was originally a person who amply demonstrated his ability to work as an imperial knight. If he had hit me with all his power, it surely would not have ended with only this. Did he hold back because I was his daughter, or simply because I was a member of the opposite sex? I knew it was probably the latter. He wasn't the kind of person to give me preferential treatment because I was his daughter. I had understood that, a long, long time ago.

“Nothing, I... didn’t do... anything.”

I barely managed to squeeze out these words, but even I, couldn’t remember clearly what I did until now. I didn’t even know if I had truly done nothing. If there was only one thing I was sure I had done, that would be having questioned mother. I only asked what on earth she had mixed inside Silvia’s tea. In the end, I didn’t even get her answer.

When she heard my question, I wondered what mother thought? She only uttered a few words deprived of meaning. Although I kind of heard an excuse, it also felt like the confession of her crime. Then, the conclusion of everything, became like that.

With a sharp pair of narrowed eyes, father looked at me as if trying to detect what emotions were inside me. Those eyes were... Right. They were similar to Soleil’s eyes when he condemned me, at the time my little sister was killed. I tried to open my mouth to explain, but the words wouldn’t come out. To begin with, I didn’t know from where I should explain. I was confused and discomposed, it seemed impossible for me to pretend to be calm again. Even though at this rate, I would be unable to prove my innocence. Even though I understood I was in a dangerous position. The words wouldn’t come to my mind. The present was overlapping with the time Soleil turned his back away from me. When my eyes unconsciously fell on the palm of my hands, I saw that my fingertips which should have lost all sensation were still shaking, just like that time. The sole difference was that those fingers, those palms, those wrists, were dyed in red. The liquid that had started to dry was entangled, binding my fingers together. As if it were the testimony of a sinner. That’s why I remembered the day my arms were tied together and I was thrown into a prison.

“...My hands, please, let me wash them.”

When these words reflexively slipped off, the sharpness of father’s eyes who was looking down on me, sat on the ground, increased. Once again, I had no other choice but to look as his fist swung down. The me who stayed unmoving, had probably given up at some point.

“Please wait, master!!”

Although someone spoke up, the voice was mixed with a frightened and panic tone. I knew that voice had saved me. When I looked up, Merge was standing there with a completely pale face. I wondered when she arrived here? Or did she arrive together with the steward when he rushed here? Her figure stood before me as if she had forced her way to stand between father and I. For a mere maid, to speak up without having been granted permission, was an act of disrespect. Moreover, in such an extraordinary situation, she should control her speech and conduct. If it had been the steward, who had received such a degree of authority, he wouldn't be held responsible for such a fault. But, this steward was simply waiting in silence at the corner of the corridor. Precisely because he had the right to speak, he didn't say anything. Because what was more important than anything was to respect the will of his master.

“.....What?”

Father lowered his raised hand and stared at Merge. I was sure he would be enraged and push Merge aside, but he only coerced her with cold eyes. If it had been a younger servant, with only this they would have started trembling, but his opponent was a senior maid. Even if her face lost some colors, she braced herself and her expression cleared up. She could deal with unexpected situations thanks to her abundant experience. That's why she had been in charge of my education. Even if now, she was attached to Silvia.

“The young lady has, nothing to do in this.”

She spoke with a low voice that sounded like it was squeezed out from the depths of her throat, as if to suppress the trembling in her tone.

“Nothing to do you say?”

Releasing a freezing voice that was even lower, father argued back. Was he suppressing his anger? But his voice was accompanied with a tone of instability, as if he was on the verge of discharging all his wrath. When such a father took one step forward, Merge naturally shrunk down. With only that it was easy to see how

disadvantaged Merge and I were. Whatever the truth, if father, the earl, were to decide here and now that I was guilty, it would become the truth. But, Merge once again, took one step forth. They confronted each other noise to noise.

“What did you see?”

When father’s low voice interrogated her, Merge answered frankly, “No, I have not seen anything.” Having received such an answer, father, probably wanting to cross-examine her, took a deep breath which resounded loudly. He was probably about to scream in an angry voice. However, not allowing him the occasion to do so, the senior maid loudly claimed with a strong spirit,

“The lady is not someone who would hurt others!”

To these unexpected words, my eyes opened wild. I was astonished there would be a person who would try to protect me, but it was also hard to believe it would be her. In the many lives I had repeated until now, she wasn’t a person who could be said to have been deeply involved with me. It was true she had been by my side in my childhood as my educator, but it hadn’t been an intimate relation. Even in this life it was the same. She was no longer my maid, she was serving Silvia. She wasn’t a family member, she wasn’t even a friend, I would even hesitate to call her an acquaintance, that’s all our relationship amounted to. And so, no matter how much she tried to protect me, I couldn’t simply feel relieved. Even if I believed her, I could easily imagine a future where I would be betrayed. And yet..... The trembling of my fingers, slightly decreased.

“.....Master, if I might be allowed to make an impertinent remark...”

“What is it?”

The one who made a follow up after hearing Merge’s words was the steward who had silently watched the situation unfold until now. Father also seemed to be willing to hear what he had to say.

"I think there might be a need to examine this situation in a more various... or should I say multifaced view."

"..."

In other words, he was saying it was premature to make a conclusion here. However, the steward was certainly not trying to protect me. If he had wanted to do so, he would have surely spoken up earlier. So I understood he said those words for Merge's sake. In a sense, you could say he was probably anxious for her who was opposing their master. If the steward was on her side, nothing bad should happen to her.

"The young lady seems to be greatly shaken, how about giving her a little bit of time?"

Hearing the words the steward added, father sank into silence. Then, he closed his eyes, his brow furrowed. Looking closely, the sleeve of father's coat was black and dirty. It was probably mother's blood. *I wonder if that person also hugged mother?* I suddenly thought. Did he grieve the departure of his beloved wife, or did he cried, straining his ears to listen to the heart that had nonetheless stop beating? I tried to imagine father's reaction as I stared at his face which appeared younger than he really was, but I failed. Aside from the fact he had slapped me, for a person who had just lost his wife, even now he seemed far too composed. I thought so because I remembered well the reaction of Soleil when he heard Silvia had died in my first life. At that time, he made an expression that said he had been cut apart from any possible touch of delight or joy. As if it had happened yesterday, I still clearly remembered how just before my eyes, his eyes had seemed to sink at the bottom of the abyss and were dyed in hatred. That's why I clearly saw the difference between father and Soleil. My father hadn't fallen into despair yet.

At that moment, in the corridor that had become silent, the footstep of several people as well as metallic sounds resounded. When I turned toward it, father's escort and Al were rushing toward us with faces that had changed colors. As I watched my escort whose face had paled, I naturally met his eyes. He had yet to grasp the situation and with his eyes opened wide in shock, he seemed to want to say something. But in a second, his lips closed off. I understood he had swallowed back his words. He couldn't foolishly ask me what happened in this place where father was too. "...Master." Father's

escort quietly called out to him. I watched attentively as he whispered something into father's ears. It's probably an urgent matter. The complexion of father changed. "I see, I understand," he nodded, then he told something to the steward. I didn't know exactly what, but it seemed that something related to the work that was about to be finished happened. My escort had also probably been helping with father's work these last few hours. It wasn't necessary a special occurrence, rather it should have been a situation no different than usual.

In these last few hours, every single thing had changed. I could no longer return to my original place.

".....You will return to your room."

Eventually, father who had to go back to work announced this to me. Then he immediately turned around and walked away. As I watched over his distancing silhouette, unable to answer, father looked over his shoulder and called, "Al." My escort was still loitering in the corridor, looking at me. "...Al!" Getting impatient, father summoned my escort with a strong tone. He was already far ahead.

"Go, Al"

"My lady,"

"You have to go."

"But,"

"I am fine so leave!"

After raising my tone, my unreliable voice shook as I added, *please*. I bit on my trembling lips. I didn't have any solemnity. But, staying here in this place like this wouldn't lead to a good result for him. I didn't know if Al had understood the situation, but he shouldn't know about mother yet. Even if he heard that something happened in the estate, I didn't think he was told the mistress of the house had severed her own life. He only knew that I was here, smeared in blood. However, because we hadn't called the doctor to examine me, he should have noticed I wasn't hurt. Even if there

were only a few people, not only Al, everyone would understand it was impossible they would leave alone the daughter of the earl if she was injured. And so, he should have understood something strange occurred. Al was staring at my face, hesitating for a short while. Then he attempted to say something several times. So, in response to this, I shook my head repeatedly. What he wanted to say, I didn't know how other would interpret it. It would probably not be a good thing for us. I was sure it would inevitably turn for the worse from all the experience I had accumulated so far. When I once again told him "Go," I didn't know if he finally took my intention into consideration, but he turned away, looking as if he was trying to shake off something.

I strongly clenched my hands, praying it wouldn't be the last time I saw him. Even though I knew my wish never come true, I still couldn't help but pray.



"My lady, let's prepare a hot bath."

Having to wait in my room until I got permission to leave was, in fact, the same as being under house arrest. The one who supported me on her shoulder and accompanied me back was Merge. Still wearing the dress soaked in blood, I stared at my fingers whose shaking had lessen. Mother's blood had even gotten under my nails. Before me, who remained petrified in front of the closed door, stood the senior maid. Somehow, there had been instructions to only leave her with me inside the room.

"...Merge, I am grateful to you, truly..."

Continuing to gaze at my fingers, when I called her with a voice still half-filled with amazement, I caught sight of her hands in my field of vision. I rose my head when she suddenly clasped my hands in hers and called out,

"Lady."

She called out to me with a tormented expression. From the day we met, I wondered how many months and years have passed. Before I noticed, she grew old and thin

wrinkles were etched in her face. But it didn't reduce her charm. The laughing wrinkles at the corner of her eyes and mouth made it clear how pleasant these years had been for her.

"I did not do anything worthily of such praises. I only said the truth."

My fingers grasped with such force and firmness hurt. Sensations came back to these hands that had almost been paralyzed. My skin that had grown cold felt her comfortable warmth.

"Moreover,"

When I looked up at her who was a bit taller than me, the shadow of her eyelash that felt on her cheek shivered.

"I have a message, from the mistress."

Merge paused here to inhale a deep breath and gulps down her saliva. Her exhaled breath made my bang shake.

"...A message?"

The reason both of our voices sounded so secretive, was only because we understood by instinct that no one must hear this story. Her unusually serious atmosphere also encouraged it. The maid of my little sister grasped my hand sullied by blood without hesitation. Despite our connected hands, the two of us originally didn't have such a close relationship. In this room where nothing was different from usual, only her and my existence differed.

"No, but first, we have to wash away the blood..."

I chased after Merge's fingers who abruptly separated our hands and grasped her wrists. Because I felt everything would remain unsettled otherwise. Moreover, if I let that moment run away, there might not be another occasion to be alone together. I was sure that outside the door, someone was already standing guard. She had come all the way up to this point, but if she were to leave the room once, I didn't know if she would be able to come back.

"What were you told? From mother, what did she say?"

"..."

My bloodstained dress seemed to cling to my body. If someone else had been here, they would surely find my queer appearance strange. But I didn't have the spare time to keep up appearance. Merge averted her gaze from my face and whispered without strength, "I am sorry, I cannot help you." Although the faint sound of the rustling of clothes echoed in the silent room, her hoarse voice on the other hand sounded like it would disappear. I didn't understand what she was apologizing for, and in the first place she hadn't answer my questions.

"If something were to happen to the madam, I was asked to hand this over."

Suddenly, she loosened up her collar and slipped her finger inside it. "Madam instructed me to not let anyone else know about it and to always hide the fact I was carrying it. She also said if the time to hand it over where to come, I would surely know to whom I should give it to..." I wondered how long she had been carrying this, but from her chest she took out an envelope. She surely hadn't treated it roughly but it was a bit wrinkled.

"Now, I understand that I was supposed to hand it over to you, my lady."

Merge declared this and put the envelope in my hands. The white paper terribly stood out against my hands sullied in red. I didn't understand mother's intention for

entrusting this letter to Merge. But she seemed to have foreseen such a day would come. No, rather, she might have prepared thoroughly, waiting for the day she would sever her own life. "But I do not know its contents. I have naturally not seen what is written." I didn't think the words she had declared were a lie. I didn't believe her but, I knew she wasn't that kind of person. She was the capable maid mother had chosen, and for this reason Merge wouldn't betray her.

".....Is this her will?"

When I clenched it between my hands, it felt warmth. I knew it was Merge's body temperature that had moved on it. But I also tried to find mother's existence on it... I ended up trying to...

"I do not know" said Merge as she shook her head a little. "I was entrusted with this letter a long time ago... so I do not know what were the intentions behind it." But this letter she had received so long ago, she had always carried it with her, taking great care of it. "I will make the preparations for the bath," she declared as her back was facing me, and her shoulders slightly shook.

Chapter 33

If this is the real end (16)

In one of my lives, I stole a novel from father's study. It was apparently a story with father and Silvia's mother as the protagonists. There weren't many characters in this book. The princess of the neighboring country and the knight chosen to protect her..... And also, the maid the princess had taken along with her from her home country. Naturally, the story didn't have only these three characters, but the ones that left a deep impression in my memory were only them. However, while it was natural for the two main characters to remain in my memory, on the contrary it was strange how I couldn't forget the maid, a supporting character whose name was never said. It was an ordinary servant and her physical appearance wasn't even described. She didn't accomplish many things in the story. In the first place, I didn't even know what was the role assigned to her. The only thing that was made clear about her, was the fact she was the person the princess had personally hand picked and took out from her home country.

"That maid might have been a bit pitiful but... I wonder if she was doing fine?"

The person who had muttered these words as their line of sight was lost in the horizon, was the author of this novel. The truth about this novel I heard from the author had been almost completely similar to my predictions. The knight described in the novel was my father, the princess of the neighboring country was Silvia's mother. In reality, it wasn't "the neighboring country" but a more distant one. Anyway, they had sacrificed their body, their heart, their everything to this forbidden love. It was a predestinated, tragic, heart-moving passion. Right. That's probably why their love became a story. Readers could dream of them. Although the characters inside the book experienced turns and twists, they were finally wedded and swore to spend eternity together. It was an ending that made you think happiness was surely waiting for them ever after.

.....But, unlike the story, in the real world, father and the princess didn't get tied together. Because the princess, returned to her country.

“In the first place, because she had run away from the civil war occurring in her home country, it was decided from the beginning she would come back once it had settled. She was only a young girl, but she was unmistakably a member of royalty, from the moment she was born she had to bear the responsibility of a person descending from the royal family. She definitively couldn’t run away from this. After returning to her country, her official duty as a member of the royal family was waiting for her.”

Therefore, due to the difference in their social positions the knight and the princess couldn’t be wedded. If you wanted to summarize everything plainly that’s what happened, but the situation must have been more complex. *“However, it’s something that couldn’t be helped”* had said the author in a sigh. The problem was what happened afterward.

“The princess who had to return to her country didn’t allow the man she loved to marry another woman.”

The woman who spat out a laughter that resembled a sneer was undoubtedly very familiar with them. Whether she had guessed my emotions or not, I remembered the author telling me about a social gathering for writers. And that one could get various information there. I didn’t know if that place truly existed, I thought she might only have said that randomly. For something she said to have written from gossips and information obtained from other people, it was awfully detailed. It would rather make more sense for her to claim to be a person who used to be involved with them. But I respected her will to not reveal her background. Because what was important was not who she was, but what was the meaning of the story she had written.

“The princess thought like this: rather than having her beloved knight snatched away by a woman whose name and face she wouldn’t know... then it was better to have him marry her own substitute.”

She narrated with loquacity. She insisted it was only a supposition and absolutely not the truth. But she continued and said that the woman who married the knight as the princess’s substitute, might have been carrying another duty. Maybe, that other

responsibility was even more important.

"It must have been, to monitor everything."

It was the answer I had already guessed from the flow of her story. I myself, wasn't simply living as the elegant daughter of a noble family. It wasn't like I couldn't understand in how difficult a position they were placed in, or how they were influenced by the expectations of the people around them. The real ending of the princess and the knight which hadn't been written in the novel, was far from a happy one. If you closed your ears at this point, you could end the story here with a dream-like ending. You could probably claim with a loud voice that true love wasn't restrain by social barrier. However, reality was never that sweet.

"A monitoring person was necessary to make sure the knight would not err from his path and fail to keep his promise. That was probably not something the princess herself wished for. But the persons who knew well the circumstanced of the two, made sure the knight never crossed the country's borders even by mistake."

"...Cross the country borders?"

"It was likely he would go to her country to elope with the princess, or to take her away by force, right? Because after all, that's how much he loved her."

It was impossible to know what kind of mess could make a person who had embraced the thought it was alright to throw away everything and anything. *And that's precisely why a tie was needed*, the author told me. In other words, "something" was necessary in order to prevent my father from moving around easily. It was for this reason this extremely selfish princess's wish of presenting another woman as her own substitute was granted. But it probably wasn't a bad agreement for both father and the princess. If the woman chosen as the substitute was a person related to the princess, through this woman, it would be possible to secretly report each other's current situation.

In that way, the princess gave a woman to the knight as her substitute. This person was the princess's maid,..... my mother.

As the overseer of the knight who had fallen for the princess, mother ended up as the only person left behind in a foreign country. Her wedding seemed to include the meaning she would never again step foot on the ground of her hometown. She was a pitiable person on whom was imposed the consequent responsibility and duty of what was called a “political marriage.” That person who became a piece of the strategic game that politics were, offered her lifetime to the princess and the knight. But if the story had stopped her, a faint hope could have bloomed for mother too. In fact, until just now, I had thought that father and mother were in mutual love. No matter if at the beginning it had been a political wedding like what would usually happen between nobles, after spending many years together, I never doubted my belief that an emotion akin to a deep affection had been born. You could say that was how well they played the part of a close married couple. Everyone envied that couple that got along so well. Father was very affectionate to mother, mother loved and respected father. There might not have been love at the beginning of their relation, but I had been convinced that the two of them had ended up in love with each other.



In the dull dark sky that seemed to be smeared with a thin layer of ink, the toll of a bell reverberated. In that place, the various people standing under the umbrellas held by servants avoided them and looked up. Even though there was no music, they partly closed their eyes, seemingly impressed by the sound. But I lowered even more my umbrella and bent down. I couldn't pretend to be lost in strong emotions like them.

“It's the sound of a departing soul.”

Someone softly muttered that. A black coffin was carried in a corner of the vast garden of our earl estate. Even though the coffin could have been decorated with special ornaments, father seemed to have decided to not do so. The bell continued to ring out as if it was dropping down on the glossy coffin. But naturally, the bell wasn't ringing for mother's sake. It would chime every day at the same time, it was a bell that announced the time for all the people who didn't have enough money to buy a watch. Ordinary it was a sound I ignored, but today only, I heard it awfully clearly. I thought it was a gentle sound, it sounded like something hitting a glass. Each time it echoed, the image of a glass being shattered to pieces again and again came to my mind. The sharp fragments seemed to pierce me here and there. In my arms, my feet, my face. And so, in my eyes, my hands seemed to be dyed in red.

“...Big sister.”

The raindrops falling on the ground made the mud sullen my feet. As I single-mindedly gazed at my dirtied feet, a shadow fell on my line of sight. When I rose my head, silver hairs that seemed to be glittering despite the absence of sunlight entered my field of vision. Under the umbrella held by a servant, my little sister was staring fixedly at me. Before us was mother's coffin. It had already been closed and mother's beloved roses were decorating it. On top of it, the merciless raindrops were falling incessantly and gliding down to the ground. On the other side was father, receiving everyone's condolences. The official explanation was that she had succumbed to an abrupt illness and the people who had come visit seemed to believe it. In the first place they had no reason to doubt it. The evaluation others had of mother was of a person who wasn't involved in trouble or wouldn't be hurt by others, not of someone who would chose to kill herself. For the sake of father who wanted a funeral as calm as possible only a limited number of persons came. But maybe due to mother's popularity, you couldn't say that only a small number of people had gathered. They stood in front of father turn by turn, offering him words of comfort and compassion. The whispering voices blending in the sound of rainfall reached my ears but I couldn't catch the content of their conversation. While I was thinking of how strange it was to not hear them despite the fact I was so close, I suddenly noticed the bell had stopped ringing. But I was probably the only one who paid attention to that. A dim rain had been falling since this morning, clouding my field of vision and blurring the scenery in a white mist, making the current scene looks like something very distant.

“Is it true...? Sister.”

A drop of water was hanging on the silver eyelashes covering those purple eyes gazing straight at me. She was probably crying until just a while before. Just by seeing the redness at the corner of her eyes I knew she was trying to endure something today. Looking at me in the eyes and clearly urging me, she once again asked, “Is it true?” Usually, her voice leaved behind a lovely reverberation that seemed to linger eternally, but today the impression it gave was different. As if it was dry, as if something was lacking... If her voice had a temperature, then I thought that today it was cold. Her pale lips were the clear proof of it.

“Did you take from my room the tea mother had prepared for me?”

Although I was feeling like I was still wandering in the middle of a dream, I could understand Silvia’s words accurately. Inside that nightmare I could never wake up from, the voice of my little sister was the only thing I perceived as something real.

“Big sister, you wouldn’t... do that, right?”

I sighed over the fact the secret could no longer be kept in the mansion. Did father talk to her, was it one of the maids who happened to be present, or did the chamberlain let something slip? The servants were never allowed to chat about a serious affair that should not be disclosed, but this restriction would not apply if their conversation’s partner was Silvia. That was because the first priority of this house was her. Someone had surely talked to her, thinking it was best to let her know. *Your older sister is a thief.*

“.....Why?”

I questioned Silvia who was staring at my face with uneasy eyes. *Why?* She probably wasn’t expecting to be asked back a question. Taken aback, the face of my little sister solidified as she exclaimed, “...eh?” The finger of my little sister which has lost its aim wander in the air.

“Why, do you think so? That I didn’t stole your tea. Why, do you believe in me?”

I do not know who you heard that from, but the situation might be exactly as that person described, you know? When I added this, Silvia’s eyes seemed to flip and opened wide, distorting her looks. She had a beautiful face that seemed to have been created by a first-class craftsman after investing all his sincerity and diligence in his earnest work. This face was very similar to her mother’s.

“Because you wouldn’t do that big sister. You would definitively never, ever, do that. Everyone was saying you might have done something to mother, but...”

The end of her sentenced wasn’t spoken out loud and disappear amidst the sound of the rain. As expected, father and the people in the estate were doubting me. I had been released from house arrest for only today as mother’s funeral was held and I didn’t know what would happen from tomorrow onwards. I had only faced father in front of mother’s room and didn’t meet him since then. Although I had thought the steward or someone else would undoubtedly asked me about the details of mother’s death, it didn’t happen. I thought they might already have drawn their conclusion.

“Big sister, I know that you truly are, a very kind person...”

The umbrella protecting the slender body of Silvia seemed much bigger than those held by the others. Maybe because of this, not many people noticed Silvia’s discreet crying voice. Our sharp-eyes father had noticed his beloved daughter’s unusual behavior, but he was in the middle of receiving everyone’s condolences and couldn’t come here. He simply threw a sharp glare toward me. However, we were at a funeral, it would be strange to show an excessive reaction to Silvia’s grieved appearance. Rather, you could say it was more natural that she mourned her departed mother. And yet, just because it was “me” who was standing in front of Silvia, father appeared to harbor wariness. Even though I was also his daughter, it didn’t change anything. In his head, I was sure he was assuming the severe older sister had said something cruel to the younger one. Since when has things been like this? No, possibly, it might have been the case since the beginning.

From the time we were born, we had been sister who were not allowed to live and grow close together.

“.....What happened?”

I didn’t know since when he was here, but Soleil was standing near Silvia as if he was trying to peer into her face. He wasn’t holding an umbrella and there was no servant at his side. Thinking he might have done so in order to reduce his distance with Silvia

even a little, I watched over the two who stood close together. The servant holding the umbrella took in the situation and tactfully bent the umbrella in the direction of Soleil, so they stood close enough for their shoulders to touch. If him, who must have been giving his condolences to father just a while ago, had come here now, that must be because father had said something to him. He may have been requested to stay by Silvia's side. Although it's such a time, although I knew it was my mother's funeral... the presence of Soleil made my heart tighten.

"...Ilya?"

Even though my name was called, I couldn't lift up my gaze. Today, for this moment only, I didn't want to see the two of them. Soleil slightly step it front of Silvia as if to protect her and was looking at me, but I didn't have the energy to ward off his gaze.

Even though I wanted to mourn for mother's death. Even though I wanted to grieve for her death. I couldn't do it. Then, because I didn't know what to do while I was in such state, I didn't have the confidence to feign calmness in front of them.

"Sorry, Ilya."

While blood was spilling from her lips, mother, on the verge of her death, had expressed an apology to me. I recalled these words again and again. Even though mother had been married off in this country like a human sacrifice, she had given birth to a child so that father could fulfill his duty as a noble. She naturally didn't have a say in this. It had been one of the obligations imposed on her. It was the job any woman married into an aristocrat family had to accomplish. She served father as the substitute of his beloved princess and even had a child; no one could fathom what were mother's feelings. Under that composed smile of her, I could easily guess she must have put away all her emotions. Like Crow had once said, the people who had given up on everything only had a smile left, I could also understand this. In fact, the letter she had left behind was short, what was written was as followed:

"I don't know how to describe the anxiety and discomposure I felt when I became pregnant. Even if I understood I ought to rejoice, my heart was already exhausted."

However, I had no choice but to give birth."

It was impossible for me to not understand mother loneliness and anxiety as she was forced to abandon her birthplace. In this situation where the best you could do was to accept reality, if you added to it the fact of becoming pregnant, it was a matter of course you would be mentally driven into a corner. If I had been an ordinary noble's daughter, I probably would not have understood. I had been born and raised in this country, at my family's side. I would never have to face such a situation like being forced to cast away my hometown, and if everything had gone well, I would have married a man who would have been my first love. But, I was repeating the same time over and over. Unable to confide in anyone, never allowed to seize the hand I had asked for help, becoming unable to even breathe I had been beaten up by a harsh reality. And that's why I understood well the feelings of mother who had to split her heart and blood to conceive a child. Reality was far too cruel to let her feel just a pure, genuine happiness.

"Looking at the face of the baby who was just born, my relief surpassed my joy. But, I thought it was fine like this. Because I had resolved myself to come to terms with reality in my own way."

Mother had written so. That she had vowed to protect this child and live as she supported her husband. But, fate was irremediably cruel.

In mother's letter, the truth even the author of the novel had not known was written. I thought that it was a reality hard to accept, for mother but also for anyone else who would have been in her place. For her, it must have been like a bolt out of the blue. Because at any rate, the princess who should have officially vowed to separate from father, had set foot in this country once again. This time she wasn't fleeing a war or seeking asylum. She had crossed the border only to meet father. Imagining the event that occurred afterward, I inevitably recalled my own past. I recalled when Silvia became pregnant with Soleil's child, the time when she told me of her pregnancy, the moment when I passed away unable to hold in my arms the child I had given birth to, I recalled these several events.

In other words, the princess had conceived father's child with her own body. She had given birth to the precious Silvia.

"I stole, Silvia. I stole something from you.

"...Why?"

"Because, even you, you stole."

The weeping voice was probably mine. But the once who was crying was Silvia. She kept saying, *I haven't done anything, and you too you wouldn't do something like that big sister.*

"Everything, everything, you stole everything."

"No, sister, I have not... not stolen anything...!"

We were sisters born at a few months of interval. You didn't need a vast imagination to guess which birthday made father happy. Even from his current devotion, it was crystal clear.

The birth of a child who was not the one of the wife would not be celebrated with great pomp. But in our mansion, it might have been different.

"Pretending to be a girl from the street, the princess became pregnant and inconspicuously gave birth to his child. But my husband absolutely didn't hide Silvia's existence, he held her up in his arms and cherished her. I remembered well the appearance of the princess as she watched over them, as well as their smiles full of satisfaction as if all the joy in this world had been gathered here."

The beautiful letters lined up on the pure white paper were slightly crooked. Mother had been right next to them, watching as father and the princess cuddled together, hugging the little baby precious. Perhaps in her arms, she was holding the newly born me.

"Silvia, you have stolen, from me... just about everything. You stole. Then, even after this... you will steal everything away from me...!"

The reason why it was decided from the beginning that I, the eldest daughter, would have to leave, was for the sake of the sickly Silvia. The man who will marry Silvia will succeed the house, and in the case something were to happen to her, father's younger brother would inherit the family leadership. But I had noticed that all of this was only a facade, a front. Father simply wanted to keep Silvia at hands. He decided to marry me off somewhere in order to detain Silvia in the estate. For example, even if now, Silvia were to fall in love at first sight with someone in the academy, the situation would not change. That man would enter our family as a son-in-law and inherit the house. I was born from father and mother, his legal wife, I was raised as a child of nobility, and grew up without experiencing any hardship or inconvenience. In that way, it was true I had lived a life everyone envied but in reality, I didn't have anything.

"Ilya... what the hell happened to you...!"

Soleil stretched out his hand. In an effort to grasp my arm, he pushed aside the umbrella held by the servant and approached me.

"Do not touch me!!"

Do not touch me with this hand. With this beautiful hand, do not touch, this body that had bathed in mother's blood.

"Do not, touch me...!!"

I dodged him and took some distance from these two. My umbrella slipped off my right hand and rolled on the ground, separating me from Soleil as if it was drawing a boundary line. In the rain that had slightly increased in strength, Soleil was still about to walk toward me. But the slender arm extended behind him didn't allow him to. My little sister controlled Soleil with her face drenched in tears. She was about to stop him from approaching to me. "Big brother." Even amidst the rain drops knocking on the ground, the whisper of Silvia still could clearly be heard. It was a helpless, naïve and soft voice that seemed to coil around you. Everyone would turn back hearing it. As

expected it was Soleil who noticed quicker than anyone else that my little sister had tripped on the mud and was staggering. I was forced to watch his profile as he embraced my little sister with one of his hands.

I knew this hand didn't exist to hug me. I also understood that this hand was not here to protect me. One day, this hand would choose my beautiful little sister who grew up without being stain by any impurity. Because there is no way to stop this hand, that had once promised me, *"From there on, let's always get along well,"* to drift away and leave me.

"I, what on earth, should I, do... how should I live, what should I do, for it to work out... Why, no one, will stay by my side...?"

For a second, the sky was dyed in white and my sight was blurred. A few seconds later, the thunder resounded. The rain intensified, the soaked coffin was reflected at the corner of my vision. My mother who should have no longer feel any pain, seemed to be screaming with a loud voice.

With a serene smile, mother who had surely lived while restraining all her emotions, had spat out her real thoughts at her very last moments.

"Sorry, Ilya."

"...I, have, never..."

Suffering and agonizing, she spoke with great pain, stopping after every breath, unable to close her eyes. She wholeheartedly looked at my face, coughing violently as if her breath was heavy like lead.

"...I, have, never been able to love you....."

That's why I couldn't withdraw my eyes until the moment mother took her last breath. Because I was hoping that maybe, she would correct those words. Because I had thought that my mother who had inhaled one big breath at her last moment, might

have laugh and said “I’m joking.” I was hoping that at the last moment she would declare, *In reality I love you very much*. But mother had stopped breathing at that moment.

“In reality, from the beginning, I didn’t have anything. Still, under the impression I had everything, I had no other choice but to continue to believe I was loved. Do you understand my feelings?”

“Big sister,”

“Even though I knew I wasn’t loved, I lived, persuading myself that I *was*, I *should* be loved... My feelings, can you understand them...?”

I embraced my body with both arms. Apart from me, no one would hug me. Still clinging to Soleil while looking at me, Silvia’s face further distorted, her lips shivering and her whole body shaking. But, that child, was hiding behind my fiancé.

“.....Ilya!!”

I heard father’s voice as he yelled, having distance himself from the persons offering their condolences. He was probably thinking I had made my little sister cry. And this wasn’t false.

But, I too, was crying.

When I turned my face and saw father who was quickly coming here and Al who was running after him, the sky was once again colored in white. A thunder strong enough to make the ground shake rang out. As I looked up because of the sound that made me wonder if the sky hadn’t been torn in two, black feathers lightly fell down.

Unblinking, my eyes followed the fluttering feathers that seemed to be dancing.

“...Crow...”

Just as I called out his name, many feathers fell on the ground, dying my field of vision in pure black. That's it, it's fine like this. If this world could end like this.

"Hey, Crow... where are you?"

Closing my eyes, on the other side of that blackness, I heard a voice.

"To straighten a thread that had entangled complicatedly and seems impossible to untie, you can only cut it with a scissor and fix it with a knot."

Chapter 34

If this is the real end (17)

Clack, the sound of something being torn to pieces rang out. I thought it sounded almost as if something was severed with scissors. I quickly tried to search for the source of that sound but the black feathers were filling all my vision, plunging me into the darkness and I couldn't see anything. I no longer knew whether my eyes were closed or opened. I was about to raise my voice but a gentle voice held me back. A voice that seemed to be singing, that seemed to be whispering.

"That child is my precious, very precious princess, Ilya."

Or maybe it was a voice full of solemnity, as if it was warning me. I didn't need to confirm it to know it was mother's voice. At that time, I was looking at mother's face reflected in the mirror, and she was also gazing at me. Yet I could not remember her expression clearly. Was she laughing? Was she sad? Or did she have the same expression full of love as usual?

"Mother."

This time, I heard an anxious voice like the one of a child. A heartrending and sad voice that made you want to unconsciously stretch out your hands to hug that child. In the middle of this pure darkness, a small hand was extended. As if it was looking for something, or was saying goodbye to someone, it moved from left to right. I was certain it was only my imagination that made it look like it was struggling, but the fact it gave me the feeling to be drowning wasn't necessarily a false impression. I prayed for someone to grasp that hand. Because it was the only thing I could do.

Please, may someone seize the small hand of that pitiful child.

".....It is not poison."

What? Just now, what did you say? I couldn't quite hear it. *Bam, Bam*. A sound echoed, as if a fist was hitting hard on a desk. I was driven by the urge to put my hand on my ears to block this sound, but, I noticed it was a noise that came from inside me. Matching the systematic echoes of that sound, my body was shaking. I realized it was the pulsebeats of my heart. If it continued like this my heart would cease to function. That's what I thought, yet I could only helplessly endure that cramping pain. When I opened my lips to gasp some air, the sound of gulping down saliva resounded.

"So, she won't die. That's what worried you, right?"

I could see mother's back as she had stepped up from the dresser. The noise I made by catching my breath and gasping in surprise was absorbed by the carpet. Reflected in the mirror, was the silhouettes of mother and me as I gazed at her back. I remembered this shaken gaze. Uneasy, lonely, sad. Even though it was my own face, it felt like looking at the face of a stranger. I have seen this scene. At that time, I was looking at mother across the mirror. It looked similar, but it also didn't. Yet, it certainly looked alike. That's the feeling I got. That's why I noticed it. Pulling the drawer just a little bit, inserting her fingers in the narrow gap, she took out "something." Only by watching the same scene for a second time could I understand how important those trivial gestures were. My heart that was beating strongly since a while ago made an even louder noise. My vision which continued to shake irregularly regained its stillness, the sensation of my feet stepping on the carpet came back. The breaths I was exhaling were making the air shake, I actually felt that I was existing now and here.

.....Time had, turn back.

I didn't have any evidence to make me think so, it could also be a long dream, but I understood with certainty it wasn't the case. Because after all, I had experienced this sensation any number of times. Each time I went back in the past in the blink of an eye, and my body kept its five senses. It might exactly be the same feeling than when a baby is taken out of his mother's womb. Even though I should not remember this sensation, I thought so. Despite the lack of wind, I noticed the air touching against my skin. My blurred vision was cleared up of all shadows, and as if my face got out of the water my hearing returned suddenly.

“Since she started attending school, that child became energetic. Yes, a lot livelier than before.”

It was a sentence I remembered hearing. It was justified. Because I had heard it once “before.” Her hairstyle and attire, and even her standing postured that I couldn’t forget, they were etched in my memory and wouldn’t go away. At the very moment the setting sun was about to end its duty, she slit her own neck. That person I was supposed to have lost for all eternity was now standing in front of me. At a distance close enough for my hands to reach her. The previous me was in deep thinking and missed the omen of her ominous words. Having already lost her sanity, mother was staring at me absentmindedly while her right arm was slightly stiffened. Her shaking shoulder was the proof. It was probably because she was preparing to raise above her head the “something” that was tightly grasped in her right hand. Now I understood this well, and that’s exactly why, I couldn’t afford to hesitate even for a second. That ‘something’ seemed to be floating in the quiet and dim twilight, resembling a white moon. As it trembled, it reflected the light and tore the night apart.

“Mother.”

In the middle of the darkness, a young voice called mother. I couldn’t say if it was a hallucination or words I said myself.

“But that’s not good, then. That situation, that broken child. It mustn’t become like this.”

Those words sounded like a signal. As if the paralysis of my body was dispelled, my petrified body became free. Almost throwing myself on her, I seized mother’s right arm. It was slender to begin with, but there was no flexibility in it, it felt almost as if I was grasping a bone. Before I had noticed, she became so thin. The one who immediately let out a groan, was it me, or mother? Anyway, I succeed in preventing mother from slitting her own neck with her right hand. I bet she never anticipated me to do that. Unexpectedly I could easily restrain her arm.

.....Even though she had carried out such a gruesome death.

To think I could prevent it so easily. "...Mother." I reflexively called her, but I didn't know what to say after that. We collapsed on the carpet, our bodies entangled as I hold her thin body in my arms. A knife fell out of mother stretched out hand. It rolled on the ground. With my arm I swept it away, throwing it in a distant place mother's hand couldn't reach. Then I strangled mother's body and restrained her. She did resist a bit, but not to the point of struggling violently, and before long I knew mother was drained of her strength. Hugging this body very, very strongly, some sobbing leaked out of my mouth and I bit on my lips.

Even though I could stop her so easily, so quickly, so uneventfully. At that time, my mother had died.

"Why... Why did you...?"

My shaking throat couldn't inhale air well and I ended up sobbing. I wept like a young child. Even if I didn't want to cry like this I couldn't suppress it. "Why," *did you die*, I almost asked, despite the fact the mother who was here now, was alive, was breathing.

"It's you, who ask that?"

I was questioned by a voice so cold you wouldn't imagine it belonged to a person who tried to kill herself. When my hands loosened unconsciously, under me mother twisted her body and repeated in an incoherent mutter, "...It's you... who ask that...?" We stared at each other at point-blank range, close enough for our cheeks to touch.

"You made Silvia leave this house."

"...What?"

I failed to ask her what on earth did she mean. The words wouldn't come out well.

"You tempted her to do so. I never forgot the day you mustered all your strengths in this fervent speech, saying it was for Silvia's sake. Even "that" husband was moved by

it. Although his heart could not be moved by anyone else, because you had insisted so much, he allowed Silvia to attend school. But you knew. How to manipulate him at will... Right, you incited him. Isn't it right?"

Mother didn't give me any answer to my question "why did you die?" Naturally. Because she didn't die. It was a good thing..... No, it should have been a good thing, but an uneasiness I couldn't shake away blocked my throat.

In all those lives I had repeated again and again and again, there hadn't been even one that had gone like I had planned. The more I wished for something, the more I strayed from my path, bent back and forth, fell. Therefore, the corrections I wanted to make never once came true. However, now I, had fulfilled my desire of saving mother, I had changed the "past" according to my wish. For the first time, it seemed like I had accomplished something.

"You truly, did well, didn't you?"

If you only cut off these words, you would likely misinterpret them as a praise. But the emotion floating in those verdant green eyes, was blame. Did I do something wrong again?

"My husband... loves Silvia. No, he loves her mother. The princess... So he always obeys that person's wishes."

But when she blinked her eyes once, an intoxicated expression appeared in them. Just like father who loved the foreign princess, mother also adored her master. Even if she ended up abandoning her hometown for that person's sake, mother might still consider herself as the princess's maid.

"Silvia said she wanted to go to school, mother. That's why I..."

"No, no, it's not true. Because that child had given up. She had given up leaving from this mansion."

A dark shadow was casted in those green eyes that were looking up at me. I once heard mother's friend praised these eyes oozing of light for being like green leaves basking in the morning dew. Mother was not called "the flower of the high-society", but even if she stood side by side with the person holding this name, you wouldn't think she was inferior. It's not that she was excelling in something. But she was a special person. And that person's eyes had become stagnant and dark, cloudy and polluted.

.....I, until now, have felt that I was already dead.

I remembered the words I heard my little sister say in one of my lives. As her gaze was clouded by a shadow, she had muttered them, looking like she would erupt in cry at any moment. Because of her frailness she wasn't allowed to do anything, the only activity she could do at best was taking a daily walk. I vividly remembered her smiling silhouette when she said she was "living" like everyone wished, but she couldn't do anything except breathing.

"...Did you know? That Silvia was thinking like this. She was living, having given up everything... Did you lock her up while knowing this?"

Each time my words left my mouth, my throat contracted and I start to suffocate. It felt like someone was attacking me, strangling me. With her back still leaning on the floor, mother tilted her neck in deep curiosity like a lost child and looked at me with innocent eyes.

"Well, isn't it safer like this?"

That's the only way to protect that child, isn't it? She whispered as if telling a secret. "I have made a vow. To protect that child to the end. We promised to her highness, to take care of her more than of our child." No longer able to reply anymore, I continued to look at mother who appeared to have lost her mind. Not minding my emotions at all, she was even smiling, telling me, *Because that child was a genuine princess.*

"...And despite that, you put drug in her tea?"

“Because that’s the only thing I could do. To keep that child in the mansion.”

“Then... it was all for the sake of preventing Silvia from going outside...?”

Just for a reason like this, my little sister had to drink such a thing?

“To begin with, Silvia was a child that shouldn’t go outside. It’s true that her body is frail and it’s a good excuse.”

“Mother, but, Silvia is... Silvia wants to become healthy... She said she envied...”

...the healthy persons. I couldn’t finish my sentence. My vision was blurring, my voice wouldn’t come out. My little sister lived on the border between life and death. I wondered, when was it again when she was affected by an illness and lost her life? I only went once to visit her as she was on the verge of death, and that child who had withered away to the point of having thin arms like dead branches had whispered, *“I’m jealous of you, big sister. I wish I had been healthier.”* I didn’t reply, and that child also might not have been expecting anything from me. It was surely just a soliloquy. Then why, did it remain in my memory so clearly?

“But I love that child. I cherish her very, very carefully.”

“...Carefully?”

“Yes. That child was always, my lovely princess. She is my one and only precious daughter in this world. That’s why, I’m sorry Ilya.”

“D-don’t say it, mother. Please.”

“That’s why, I have never.....”

Ah, wait. I didn’t want to hear the rest. My lips that had dried up completely, exhaled an arid breath. I couldn’t even tell if I had spoken up those words or not, but mother thin fingers gently stroked my cheek. The warmth I couldn’t help but desire in my

childhood was there, here and now. Yet, it felt like gravels of sand were thrown in the depths of my heart. I couldn't help but feel a dull pain.

"D-don't say it, mother. Please."

"That's why, I have never....."

I promptly covered her soft lips with the palm of my hands. Still, her muffled voice was resisting, trying to say some words. That's why I pressed down that person's face with even more strength. Everything I had believed in, was gone.

"Do not say it, mother, don't. Don't say it, d-don't say....."

That you don't love me, even if it's a lie, don't say it. Don't say you didn't love me even once. I didn't want to know that in this world, no one had ever loved me. No, in truth I already knew since long ago, but still, I wanted to pretend I didn't.

"My, mother. My, and mine only, mother."

That's right. In reality, she should have been my mother and mine alone. Until the day, until the moment Silvia was born in this world.

"Once is fine, it's fine even only once, so lie. Tell me... that you love me."

I felt mother's breath on my palms and heard her groaning voice. I wanted to hear these words too, but I couldn't move from that spot nor could I remove my hands. My only thought was that I had to block her words. The voice that rejected me sounded like a signal announcing the end of the world.

"Mother, mother, do you, love me.....?"

In the green eyes which were wide-opened, I could see the face of a child who had broken down in tears. I saw her ashen hairs and her eyes of the fade color of fallen leaves. It was a face that looked terribly familiar. That figure who kept crying was pitiful, sorrowful, and made my heart ache.

“.....Mother !!!!”

That's why, someone please, save that child.

Someone please, save her from that despair.

Chapter 35

If this is the real end (18)

If asked whether I tried to kill her or not, I would answer with confidence, “No.” But, if I was asked what I was trying to do then, I would be at a loss for a reply. Because at that moment, I was trying to erase the existence of mother itself. It felt a bit different from robbing someone’s life, but I couldn’t explain well.

“Do you think that’s an excuse?”

The oppressive voice of father sounded distant. It was the usual feeling of having no sense of reality. Although I knew I wasn’t in a dream, I thought we were almost like the fictive characters appearing in a story. I barely felt the sensation of being alive.

“Are you listening, Ilya?”

Lying on the bed, mother was breathing silently, but she wasn’t sleeping. She was just staring fixedly at me. Father and I were standing on the bedside, the steward was right behind father, and two maids were waiting in the corners of the room. One of them was Merge.

.....If at that time, Merge hadn’t barged into the room, I think I would have certainly choke the life out of mother.

When I brought out from Silvia’s room the bottles containing the tea, the maid who happened to be present went to report the situation to the steward. According to her, just after I left my sister’s room, she had run to find him. Then, the steward who was informed of the circumstances, ordered a maid who had been working here for a long time, Merge, to go watch over the situation. He must have judged that a young and inexperienced maid wouldn’t be able to deal with it.

Originally, only father could enter in mother’s room without asking for permission.

But, this limitation didn't apply when an unexpected situation occurred. In the absence of the family's head, the authority fell on the steward. So, since it was her mistress's room she could have asked for the steward's authorization and be allowed to enter. There was a reason why Merge barged in without waiting for getting someone's consent. I didn't think she knew something was happening in the room, but she might have sensed the unusual atmosphere. And so; she was able to prevent the worst-case scenario.

"I had no intention to bring harm to mother. I was simply a bit confused... I am truly sorry..."

I deeply bowed, almost to the point of falling. I staggered a little, but I desperately maintained my posture. I must avoid at all cost losing my consciousness here. If everything is not cleared out, I will be confined in my room. No matter how, I must prove I was sane. Even if I was aware that in reality, a part of me had broken.

"Do you really thing so? You had your hands on your mother's neck. And you said you didn't mean to harm her.....?"

From the corner of my eyes I saw father swung his arms. My shadow on the carpet swayed along with the light illuminating the room. It almost looked like it was trying to escape from father's hands. I didn't know if I was slapped or hit but a buzzing sound echoed in my ears. This time I fell on the carpet. When I reflexively looked up at father's face, I met his eyes that were scowling at me. His amber pupil looked like those of a beast. I couldn't help but be frightened by this glare full of hostility, this gaze that was as if he was about to kill his prey. It was unmistakably my own blood-related father, yet he looked like a stranger. In those eyes oozing of hatred, I couldn't feel the slightest bit of affection toward his daughter. Something slimy and lukewarm glided along my chin and when I reflexively pin it down with my fingers, I realized it was blood. I must have cut my lips.

As I stayed on the ground with my gaze unintentionally lowered, my cuff became dyed in red. Still, that amount of bleeding was strange. As I was pondering over it in doubt,

“...Master, I beg your pardon, but...”

Merge took one step forward from her position near the wall and gently interjected. Father answered “What?” while still glaring at me. His gaze looked like it belonged to an official confronting a criminal. I wondered if he thought I would do something if he were to take his eyes off me? This sharp gaze seemed like it wouldn’t leave me any gap, wouldn’t miss the slightest carelessness.

“The lady seems... to be injured... somewhere.”

When she reservedly pointed out that fact I faltered. An injury? I wondered when it happened. But now that I had been told, I felt a painful tingle in my arms. Since I was wearing a dark color dress like usual, I hadn’t notice, but it seemed the sleeves were clinging to my skin as they were soaked. No that I think of it, when I stole the knife from mother... No to be exact, when I struggled with her to snatch her knife, it felt like I grazed my arms. But at that time, I didn’t feel pain. Or should I say there weren’t much pain?

Feeling a gaze on me, I peeked at father’s expression and saw he was looking at my hands. As if this too strong gaze was piercing me, a liquid felt drop by drop from the fingertips of my right hand.

“Master, this was in the room.”

The old steward standing behind father nervously called out to him. Then, he slowly stepped in between father and me. I could only see his back, but I knew his hand was holding a handkerchief, and the knife was resting on it. He respectfully presented it to father with his head bowed low, as if he was holding a family heirloom.

“What is that?”

I didn’t know to whom he was asking this question. That voice which seemed to crawl

on the ground made my body freeze by reflex. Because father's voice was always driving me to a corner. My heart pounded strongly. I feared everyone would hear it. That's how deep the silence that had settled inside the room was. At the moment the gazes of all present were converging on me,

"It's mine."

A dignified voice rang out. Having simply watch the situation unfold until now, mother suddenly spoke out. She hadn't raised her voice, yet it held a might strong enough to tear apart the stillness of the room.

"...What?"

When I stood up while listening to father's hoarse voice, blood dropped down on the carpet. I thought it was only a scratch, but it might not be so. Rather, it might be quite deep.

.....Deep enough to leave a scar behind.

When I held my right hand, mother asked, "Could someone call for a person who can treat her wound?" She also raised up her upper-body, but the steward perceived her somewhat blank look. Mother's expression didn't seem completely sane yet he remained unperturbed and simply answered back, "I understand," before putting the knife in his pocket and leaving the room after lightly bowing his head. No one spoke up during this exchange. Father also saw him off in silence. In the middle of the room that fell quiet again, a monotonous voice said, "Ilya, wouldn't it be better to sit down? You are bleeding a lot." Even though her daughter was hurt she didn't sound flustered at all. Besides, while she had been the topic of our conversation until now, she didn't seem to feel concerned at all. At least, if someone had tried to kill you, shouldn't you show a bit more reaction?

"You said this knife was yours?"

Father asked mother. His tone was a lot softer than when he was talking to me.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“What did you plan to use it for?”

But, it somewhat felt like his words were filled with more tension compared to usual. He seemed to have never ever thought mother would possess such an object. Indeed, it was impossible to imagine the mother who was always emitting a gentle atmosphere holding a knife in her hand.

“The purposes of a knife are numerous.”

Mother lightly laughed. Because it was a perfect mask, I hadn’t noticed until now. That mother would always past a smile on her lips, as if she was never pained, never felt anguish, was never disgraced. To become this skillful, did she live her whole life while concealing her emotions?

“.....Mother tried,”

As I looked at her face, the words slipped out of their own accord.

“...Ilya.”

A calm voice called my name. When I reflexively turned my head, mother was smiling at me with her head tilted. I knew what it meant even without taking the time to think about it. By showing an affectionate expression and a bright smile, she was trying to shut down my words. “Ilya,” she called my name once again, but this time I didn’t confirm her expression again and turned around to face father.

“Mother tried,”

“...Ilya!”

The high-pitched voice that was trying to cover my own voice roused up the mood. However, after the voice filled with an impatient tone echoed in the room, a tense silence fell.

“Mother tried to kill herself.”

Because I had to tell him clearly, I intended to speak with a voice a lot louder than usual. But my words faltered. Even now I still couldn't believe mother had tried to take her own life. Despite the fact I had actually witnessed that moment, that I had hold in my arms her bloodstained body and seen the light leave her eyes..... even if I had attended her funeral, if someone were to told me all of this had only been an illusion, I may believe it.

“...Ilya!!”

Mother repeatedly called my name. As if she was asking for my help. But I thought her scream was the same as affirming my words. For this exact reason, father moved his line of sight from me to mother and asked while frowning, “...What is she talking about?” “What have you done, Ilya... what have you...” There was no need to bother confirm it. I knew mother was glaring at me with accusing eyes. Her lips must have lost their colors and her face turned white like paper, I was sure of it.

If it was the usual me... no if it was the me until yesterday, I would surely have done what mother wanted me to. However, no one could help me anymore..... Because the life I should have saved, I had tried to make it disappear with my very own hands. Tightly grasping my trembling fingers, after blinking once, I stared at mother's face. As expected, mother's lips were trembling. This faced dyed in grief belong to none other than a victim. That pitiful figure which made everyone wants to extend a helping hand overlapped with Silvia's.

“Mother, isn't it fine for me... to protect myself?”

Every breath was like a painful gasp. I thought I didn't want to cry but in fact..... I couldn't. My mouth distorted and I might have made an expression similar to a young child about to throw a tantrum.

“...After all, mother you, about me... you... do not... love me, right?”

As I said those words, my heart felt like it was gouged out. Blood spurt out of my torn-out chest, everything reflected in my eyes was dyed in red. When I asserted this, mother intently stared at me with her eyes wide opened, yet her face became blurred and my vision swayed. After time turned back, mother had not said to me “I do not love you.” It was already an event of the lost past. But I now understood even without being told. Because I knew this truth. Even if mother didn't remember, I could not forget it.

Since it was the case, then I had to protect myself.

If I thought about mother's feelings, I knew I should act as if nothing happened and hold my tongue. It would be best if I kept quiet about the fact she mixed a drug inside Silvia's tea and pretend it never happened. But if I did that, I would become a mere thief who stole my little sister's tea leaves. If the story became that I reflexively attacked mother after being reprimanded by her for stealing, everyone would believe and assent to it. This explanation had a lot more credibility than me trying to stop mother for taking her life. Besides, I knew I had no other choices but to do that in order to subdue this matter. I didn't know what kind of verdict father would give otherwise; maybe mother would put in a good word for me and it wouldn't turn out into a too big mess.

However, that was only my wishful thinking. I didn't know what actions mother would actually take. There was the possibility she would keep wearing her lady mask and condemn me along with father.

After all, mother had silently watched as father beat me. She did not even speak up to stop father when he raised his fist.

“Since you won't defend me, mother... then, I have to protect me myself...”

I couldn't even tell if the liquid falling drop by drop on the carpet and forming a little puddle was the blood falling from my arms or the tears dropping from my painful cheek. But what soaked in the dark colored carpet definitively came from me. With all the many lives I lived, everything related to honesty and purity had disappeared in me. So maybe, it could be that even these tears had become black and muddy.

"...Ilya, what the hell are you talking about?"

Instead of mother who had sunk into silence, father questioned me with an unusual bewildered voice.

"...Father."

"...What is it?"

"Father, have you ever thought about it? That you might be causing pain to someone?"

"What?"

"Father, were you aware, of mother's suffering?"

"...What the hell are you trying to say...?"

He ought to have heard, but was he pretending to not understand? I was glared at by sharp eyes full of harshness and for a second I was at a loss for words.

"Ilya, will you please stop already."

At that time, mother's voice rang out, sounding as if she was about to cry.

"You don't know anything...!"

That's true. Mother didn't know I had read the letter she had entrusted to the maid. That was normal. Since I had read it after she passed away. Was she confused to the point of not realizing she had used the word 'princess' when she tried to commit suicide? But in this situation, such a detail was only a trifling matter. The line of sight of everyone present gathered on mother who was shaking helplessly. Her figure which was crossing both of her hands in front of her chest looked like Silvia's. Mother and Silvia didn't have a blood connection. But maybe due to the long time they had spent together, their gestures and facial expressions were similar. When I felt so, my vision blurred once again. I felt a distinct love from those trivial gestures. It seemed to make me realized they could be a family even if they weren't related by blood.

"Merge."

When I called her, from the corner of the room, "Y-yes," a voice clearly shaking answered back.

"You are holding onto something that had been entrusted to you by mother, aren't you?"

When I looked at Merge's face, she visibly gulped down and put her hand on her chest. Mother's "letter" was probably always hidden there.

"Merge."

When I called her name to hurry her, she promptly looked toward mother. Even though she kept quiet, this gesture showed the answer. Mother stared at me with a slightly befuddled expression. She was probably wondering why I knew. It was probably a pledge only shared between the two of them. But considering this, though Merge wasn't aware of the circumstances, it was precisely because the two of them had concealed it that this tragedy happened.

...A tragedy. That's right, it was indubitably a tragedy.

This time, it seemed I could avoid that tragedy. Because I rescued mother and I could still live through it. However, next time things won't necessarily be the same. If there was a law behind this life I had repeated many times..... In an incident like this one, I thought that it wouldn't be strange if mother, Silvia or I were to lose our life.

"Father, mother had entrusted a letter to Merge. Everything is written inside it."

"...Is it true?"

This time, when father's strict glare fell on the maid who was mother's trusted confident, she trembled enough for it to be visible. When mother had taken her life, she had pleaded for me, but this was surely because she thought of mother's letter. Perhaps, she didn't know the whole content but might be aware of one part of it. Silvia was, exactly as mother had said, "a genuine princess," the blood of the princess from a foreign country ran in her, making her a member of royalty. As such, if you considered how devoted Merge was to Silvia... I could more or less understand the principle behind her behavior. Besides, apart from this explanation, I couldn't find another reason as to why she retired from behind my maid.

If I considered the fact that on an emotional level, she simply loved Silvia more than I, then prioritizing this feeling, Merge may have begged mother to let her teach that child by all means.

Regardless of appearances, wasn't the "young me" who had no other choices but to exert great efforts, quite helpless?

"...Ilya! What is the meaning of this? What gives you the right to say such a thing!!"

From the bed, mother rose her voice. Because she was a person who rarely yelled, maybe her throat hurt, the end of her sentence became hoarse.

"The right you said? Am I not "your" daughter?"

Yet, you will not defend me, right? Was what I wanted to say, but the words didn't come

out.

“Or am I supposed to say, that I, am not your daughter, mother?”

I felt that it might already be hopeless. I knew people wouldn't die of sadness, but when it hurt so much, I thought that maybe my breathing would stop. I closed my eyelids and one after the others, tears dropped down.

“I am, your daughter. And also, father... I am also your daughter. Yet.....”

When I inhaled a deep breath, my throat hurt. While sobbing convulsively, I shouted,

“Why...! Why, do you not love me.....!!”

Chapter 36

If this is the real end (19)

Feeling a pain that made me wonder if my chest hadn't been torn open, I was unable to stand and remained crouched on the ground. Apart from my sobbing, I couldn't hear any other sound. Not even one. I didn't even hear the sound of someone breathing or the rustling of clothes.

".....Big sister?"

In this world devoid of sound, these muttered words especially stood out. At first I thought it was my imagination, but I certainly heard a lovely voice called out once again "Sister." When I looked up, who knew since when she had been here, Silvia was standing in front of the opened door.

"Big sister, what happened?"

Did she willfully open the door without waiting for permission, or did the maid felt a presence and opened it to check the corridor? Anyway, before I knew it, my little sister was here and was now about to enter the room.

"Silvia, do not come in. Return to your own room."

Father ordered her with a strict expression that he probably had never shown to Silvia before. I thought that Silvia would undoubtedly be frightened, but she didn't, she simply looked at me with a titled head and a stupefied expression. This girl who had never been reprimanded by our parents and who, no matter what she did, would at most by offered a candid advice, seemed like she never ever thought she could become the target of someone's anger. And so, ignoring father's words, she entered the room without hesitation. Ignoring it like it was the most natural thing to do, she didn't pay

any mind to the words of the man who, despite being our father, was also the master of an earl house. It's something that would be impossible for a nobleman's daughter, but it seemed it did not apply to Silvia. "Silvia, you mustn't," Mother's words also didn't have any considerable effect.

Silvia didn't pay them any heed and walked straight toward me. She looked down on me who was basking in the faint light that came through the windows of this wide room. The sun had already set, so the light that came from outside was only the frail light from the moon and the stars. Although today was such a terrible day, the night sky was cleared up and serene, completely cloudless.

".....Don't approach her."

Father gave a command with a voice lower than earlier, but he wasn't looking at Silvia, he was looking at me. The one who was approaching was Silvia and yet, these words weren't destined to her.

If you touched something beautiful and ephemeral, it'll break.

So, was he saying that a person like me wasn't allowed to approach her? My throat made a strange noise several times, so I grasped it tightly with both hands wondering what happened. Then, I realized it was my weeping sounds. I wanted to ask him why he said that, but the words wouldn't come out. At that moment,

"Why?"

Silvia crouched down and looked up at father. Because she was sitting in front of me, her untied silver hairs were softly swaying in front of my eyes.

"Why can't I come father? Isn't big sister crying?"

"Silvia, it's fine so get away. To begin with, why did you come here?"

"Today is the day of my medical examination. Did you forgot? The doctor was examining me in my room, but Maurice came to call him. I thought you might be sick,

but he said it was for an injury so.....”

“...I see, I understand. You came to see what happened.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“You are a nice child.”

“But, why?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why don’t you hurry and treat big sister? Since a while now, the doctor was waiting in the corridor.”

“..”

“Rather, shouldn’t she have been examined before me? Say, what happened? Father?”

“Silvia,”

Bending her knees, my little sister slid toward me and closed the distance between us, abruptly extending her hand.

“Don’t touch her!”

“Do not touch me...!”

Father and I exclaimed at almost the same time. But as expected, Silvia didn’t show the slightest hesitation and wrapped her arms around my shoulders. I tried to twist my body but she restricted me with a strength I would never have thought her frail body possessed. It was a gentle but firm grip that didn’t permit me to resist. I noticed the arm I had injured hadn’t any strength left in it.

“Why? Why mustn’t I? Father? Mother you too, why? Why are you not saying anything? See how big sister is crying. Moreover, she is hurt. There is a lot of blood. Why? Why

are you leaving it like this? Why are you staying still?"

She kept repeating "Why, why?" like a child, with doubts and incomprehension mixed in her voice.

"You are even bleeding from your lips... Did someone... hit you? Say, Ilya. What on earth happened?"

Father and mother both wouldn't answer. They simply looked at Silvia in silence while making difficult expressions. Seeing them like this, she must have thought we wouldn't make any progress. So this time, she peered at my face and questioned me instead.

"Silvia,"

"...Yes, what?"

When I called her name, her purple eyes narrowed and softened. There were bright eyes like those of a kitten. She might have made this expression to make me feel relieved. But Silvia's temperament was also like this to begin with. It may be that because she had been raised with love while being protected and treasured, in the same way, she could love, protect and cherish others too. She would do it selflessly, without hoping for a reward. My little sister always reached out her hands without the slightest hesitation. In my lives that repeated, that accumulated, Silvia had done that so many times. The first one had been the incident in the stables. You could say that this incident which only lasted a few seconds, was what decided my actions afterwards. It was the day I decided I wanted to cherish my little sister. At that time..... when the horse's hoof was closing on me, I remembered there was a maid beside me, and behind us there was also the chamberlain. They were standing much more closer than Silvia who was just passing by. But, when I tripped and the frightened horse neighed and rose his hoof, at that moment the only person who moved to save me had been Silvia. If something had happened to me, both the maid and the chamberlain would have had to bear the responsibility. All the persons serving a noble should have that resolution. But even knowing this, at that moment, they couldn't react at once, they couldn't make the decision..... The decision to save me. If it had been someone

who was more experienced to some extent, they might not have made the same decision. Since there was a possibility they would get dragged in it themselves, it wasn't strange for them to try to avoid it. Even I understood this way of thinking wasn't wrong. The fact that Silvia had stepped forth before me without hesitation at that moment, was simply because she was very young and couldn't correctly assess the situation. Actually, we were saved by the stable boy who pulled on the bridle, Silvia hadn't concretely saved me. Still, this child never stopped reaching out her hands for me.

In one of my lives when I was brought to a brothel, my little sister had tried to track me down. A few years had passed since I had eloped from the estate. During that time, Al told me she was always looking for me. Even after she became part of the marquis' house, I think she kept her eyes opened for any clues with great devotion. As I was already on the verge of death, I couldn't make a normal judgement, but her gentleness felt like something unnecessary. Sometimes, I remembered the kind hand of my little sister. When I suddenly woke up in the middle of the night, my little sister was sitting at the bedside, knitting. When our eyes met, she smiled and whispered she had been worried because my fever was high. Hearing her kind voice, she overlapped with mother's figure. Even though she wasn't a person who would speak with this tone, it felt like mother was sitting there. Even though the person in question never came to see me even at my very last moments.

The father and mother whom I shared blood with, always quickly gave up on me, forsook me. Yet, my little sister who was only a half-sibling, never abandoned me.

Even after seeing my shabby appearance when I was reduced to being a prostitute, the only one who didn't frown in unease and disapproval was my little sister. It was Soleil who restrained that child who tried to reach out to me without hesitation.

"Silvia, Silvia, I... cherish you."

"Yes, I know."

I had explained to Crow that the fact she was my love rival wasn't a reason to not cherish her. Even now this emotion hadn't changed.

“But I, took the bottles containing the tea that’s precious to you.”

“...Is that so?”

My little sister hugged me in her arms, her hand stroking my back. She repeated the same gesture again and again, very gently. “Why?” she asked me and in her voice there wasn’t any blame. She was simply asking me a question. At mother’s funeral, my little sister had said I wasn’t the kind of person who would do that. She had screamed it while her whole body was shaking. The only words that left her pale lips were words that said how much she believed in me. She seriously seemed to believe in my innocence.

“Ilya, stop.” The person who tried to stop the sobbing me to confess was mother. Over Silvia’s shoulder, I saw her brushed away the quilt and try to get up. I wondered if she was about to come here. Lending a hand to mother, father ordered in a powerful tone, “Ilya, get away from Silvia.” He might have known I brought out the tea from Silvia’s room. In a daze, I silently stared at my parents’ figures as they were joining hands. Even now, I still didn’t fully understand what was their relation, what was between them. Until mother killed herself, I had not doubt they were two persons tied up by love, an affectionate couple. And I dreamed to become like them.

“Big sister, why? Why did you take my things?”

Not paying any attention to our parents, Silvia asked me again. Mother let out a silent exclamation.

“.....Because, it’s unfair.”

What leaked out of my mouth were words even I myself completely didn’t expect to say.

“...I mean, why? Why, why... is it always you, Silvia? Why is it always only Silvia?”

Being loved by our parents, being chosen by Soleil, being able to grasp happiness. Why was it always only Silvia? Also...

“Sister?”

Until the very end, the person who never abandoned me, was also my little sister. Even I had resigned myself to this life and yet, my little sister always tried to rescue me with her pure and holly heart. It's true that she also betrayed me. I remembered well Silvia's appearance, her face that had lost colors, when she was pregnant with Soleil's child. But above anything else, my little sister kept extending her hands to me. No matter how many times life repeated and the same moment piled up, each time, she tried to extend her hand. And then, I, no matter how many times I repeated my life, I lost that little sister. *“I'm glad I'm your little sister,”* was a sentence said long, long ago. The person who had said it wasn't the child standing in front of me now.

“Stop this immediately! Ilya!”

Mother who raised her voice grasped my arms. But Silvia talked back, “The one who need to stop is you, mother!” Mother faltered due to this fierce manner of speaking. It was surely the first time Silvia had opposed her.

“Isn't my big sister crying...”

When I looked at her face, Silvia was also shedding tears.

“Why is nobody helping her...!!”

The gentle Silvia. My lovely little sister. Yet, that child had stolen my most precious thing. I wanted to love her. I wanted to. I understood I should, I had to love that child. I mean, she was my one and only little sister. If we could take each other hands, I was sure life would become wonderful.

As if tearing off her shaking fingers from me, mother quietly released my arms.

“.....Silvia, I intended to cherish you.”

“Big sister?”

“Always, I’ve always meant to do that.”

“What happened to you?”

“But, I can’t.”

I cupped the little face of Silvia in my hands. My right hand wet in blood dirtied her face in red.

“I... cannot, love you.”

I recalled the thoughts mother spat out at the moment of her death, her real thoughts. When she told me she couldn’t love me even once, she spat out blood as if it was a great sin.

I thought of my mother who said she couldn’t love in front of the daughter she should have loved.

I thought of my mother who couldn’t hold out her hand in front of the daughter she should have embraced. I was probably the same.

“I am sorry, Silvia... I’m sorry, I can’t, love you.”

My throat made a loud sobbing sound.

“I cannot... bring myself to love you...”

Looking at her in the eyes, at the moment I told her so, the depth of my throat became blocked by a clot of blood. You tried to give me a deep affection, but also robbed everything away from me. A drop of light floating in Silvia's purple eyes turned into a tear and slid down on her cheek. These beautiful eyes of her always seemed to be swirling in sadness. Her slightly pursed lips shivered. Reaching for my own hand still lingering on her cheek, she wrapped it up in her own small hand and whispered. With a voice so helpless it seemed it would melt in the air, she said,

"I know that."

I know that since a long time ago.

Chapter 37

If this is the real end (20)

I know everything. So, it's fine.

Silvia murmured so while gently grasping my hands. This face that tried to forgive everyone and anyone was half dyed in red. The red of my blood. "...There is a stain." When I suddenly murmured that out of nowhere, my little sister smiled and nodded, "I know." Her own tears washed away the stain on her white cheek. That appearance was so heroic it was touching, yet it was also heartbreaking.

"It's alright big sister. I know everything so it's fine."

Silvia, who softly brought her face closer to mine who was still shaking, was also trembling like me. Her tender voice tickled my earlobes, oozing of kindness like the voice of a holy mother, yet it brought with it a pain that wrenched my chest. Normally at that time, the one who ought to hug the other and reassured her with words like "there is nothing to be afraid of" should be me. I was the older sister, and she was the younger one. We had always done so until now. That's why, when she gently encouraged me by stroking my shoulder, it felt terribly uncomfortable.

I had hurt the child I ought to protect.

Because I precisely understood it in my mind, I didn't want to stay beside her. I knew I mustn't be such an insensible person, but I still thought I should separate from my little sister. I didn't manage to twist this strengthless body. The tears that fell from Silvia's cheeks soaked her shoulders, slightly dying her pale colored dress into a deeper shade. While gazing at it from the corner of my eyes, I repeatedly blinked. I wanted to once again say "I'm sorry" but the words didn't come out. My shivering throat only leaked out a groan. Even so, Silvia replied, "I know."

.....What on earth, do you know?

I wanted to asked her the true meaning of her words, but a low voice interrupted me,

“If nothing is done soon, her life will be at risk.” When I quickly raised up my head, a person who should have been waiting in the corridor drew close to me with a grim expression. Then, wedging himself between my parents and me, he abruptly sat down. Next, he peered into mine and Silvia’s face.

“It seemed you had an important and complicated talk ongoing, so I waited in the corridor but...”

The wrinkle hand of the doctor pressed on my shoulder and pulled me apart from Silvia. Such a behavior toward a noble could be criticized but he wasn’t a person to whom you could say that. He had served our house for decades since my grandfather’s time, but even if you put that fact aside, he would still be treated with great care as a person versed in the medical arts. Because such persons were few. Moreover, when he rebuked us in a calm tone, “I want to avoid a case of a person dying from excessive blood loss under my watch,” we all the more couldn’t raise the slightest protest.

“If we do not treat her soon, it will become serious.”

In a sense, the room that had been very tumultuous until now had its mood dampened and became still as death because of the abrupt intruder. The maid waiting in the corner and even my parents were watching the doctor’s movement. It felt like everyone was holding their breaths as if to not make any sound. The air froze to the point the mere sound of breathings sounded loud. The doctor’s voice which rang out in this stillness held an unusual impressiveness. After being urged by him, “Then, hurry up, let us go,” when I wobbly stood up, Silvia stood by my side to support my body.

Even though I was confused at this distance that seemed too close, I peeped at the profile of my little sister who was so closed I could hear her respiration. Then, I met her purple eyes which contained a pale light. I didn’t think our gazes would meet so I faltered. Even though what was directed at me was a gaze full of kindness, that didn’t give me any sense of security. An indescribable anxiety swirled in my chest, as if the ground spreading under my feet was made of glass. I understood well that Silvia held no malice. Due to her nature, tricks and plots were unlikely. But I knew that staying

with my little sister wasn't safe. At least for me, that was so. That's why, as I hardly could bear it, I spontaneously took one step back. Soft fingers gently brushed my back as if they were chasing it. It was a gesture devoid of any trick or hidden meaning, a gesture not made because the person in question was waiting for a reward. In the places touched by these fingers, it felt like a soft sensation spread out.

.....I wasn't sure of how to call that thing that was bestowed to me like this.

Generally, it was said that among aristocrats, a kindness given without expecting anything in return didn't exist. And so, I was taught that being kind to someone and receiving someone's kindness had a meaning...

"Big sister, let's return to your room."

Even though I had put some distance between us, Silvia didn't concern herself with it and lent her hand as usual. Even though I had told her I didn't love her, even though the meaning should have been clearly conveyed. The girl who was looking at me with an innocent expression acted as if nothing wrong happened. Only the drop of water remaining in her long eyelashes proved that the earlier disturbance really occurred. It was like not being loved by me was trivial. With an expression that said she didn't care about that, she was earnestly offering me her consideration and kindheartedness.

"Wait, Silvia."

When we were about to follow the doctor who had left the room, a voice rang out behind us. Holding mother who had a vacant expression in her eyes, father was looking at Silvia and Silvia only. But, without turning back, my little sister urged me, "Let's go big sister."

"Silvia, you will stay here. Even if you go you'll hinder the medical examination."

Stating this in a somehow hurried tone, father moved his gaze to me. He had certainly called the name of my little sister, called for "Silvia." Yet there was one reason why he

looked at me..... To coerce me. He knew that by doing this, he could manipulate his daughter at will. Because that had been the case until now.

“Besides, you’ve done enough already.”

When she heard that, Silvia quickly turned back, surprised. Since her name had been said, naturally, she must have thought these words were addressed to her. But that wasn’t the case. I understood this sentence was destined to me, the person who had thoughtlessly whispered to my little sister, “I don’t love you”.

You’ve done enough already. Your emotions should have settled now. What more do you want from your little sister?

“.....Silvia, do as father says. You know you mustn’t hinder the doctor, right?”

“...Big sister?”

“Stay together with father and mother.”

“...Why? Why do you say that?”

I grasped the slender fingers of Silvia. Like earlier, the little sister who was facing me kept repeating “Why?” Her youthful face didn’t have enough blood in it, it didn’t look healthy. It was a lot better than what it used to be in the past, but her height and body weight were still far away from the average. Her small body looked very young. Now that I thought about it, because that child always stayed in the mansion, it was only recently that she discovered the outside world. How lonely must have been the life in the academy where the maids who always accompanied her weren’t present? It was something she had wished for herself, but this new life must have been harder than what she imagined. On top of being thrown out in the outside world by herself, she didn’t have any friend and the older sister who told her to rely on her didn’t stay close to her. Not understanding her right from her left, she had surely felt fear.

That’s probably why she relied on Soleil. I could imagine the deep relief my little sister felt the moment when, inside the academy full of strangers, she spotted that one and only known face.

“.....It’s fine now.”

That’s right. It’s enough. Silvia supported me. Rather, she presented her hand and told me “it’s alright.” Just that was already plenty enough.

“It’s already fine, Silvia. I can go by myself.”

Because contrary to Silvia, I was alone from the beginning.

“I can walk without having to rely on you,” I told her while smiling.

When she heard me, Silvia’s eyes slightly opened wide. She whispered once again, “Why?” But covering that fleeting voice,

“Come here, Silvia.”

Mother’s voice called her. It was a kind voice but it was also weak, showing her anxious and shaken heart, and it perfectly served the role of diverting Silvia’s attention. When she threw a glance in mother’s direction, I slipped through my little sister’s hold. Then I went after the doctor who had already left. My knees shook, and even to just take one step forth I had to put strength in my whole body, but I could still go forward. Several steps ahead, Merge was standing there, and as she glanced at me with a preoccupied look, I whispered, “Please.” With only that, my intention would surely be transmitted to her.

Her face had lost its color but she strongly nodded and tightly clenched her chest.



When I was a child, I used one room of the estate as my study.

I felt depressed by just going back and forth my own room and the archives. So, I wanted to change my mood and made a request to father to freely use the room from where I could see the roses mother grew. My request was passed through the steward, but it was unexpectedly accepted. The little room that hadn't been used in a few years was allotted to me at the condition I wouldn't cause trouble to the maids and chamberlain and I obtained permission to use it as I wanted. That was probably done with the implication to urge me to be independent. But I remembered I wasn't dissatisfied as I was able to bring as much books as I wanted in the room that originally only contained a desk and chairs and was wide enough for me who spent time by myself. That new environment had enough influence to blow away all my gloom.

Since I became Soleil's fiancé I hadn't had any time to rest, so it was the first time in a while I could savor a taste of liberation.

I moved the desk to the window, put flower vases in the corner, hanged new curtains. Because that room was located on a recess of the first floor, I could see the roses mother had trimmed by peeking through the window. As no one other than me would come in this room, I could forget time and immerged myself in reading. As expected when my private tutor came I had to return to my room, but apart from those moments, I spent most of my time there. I read many fairy-tales destined to children I wouldn't have been able to touch if I had been under the adults' scrutiny like usual. Because fairy-tails had been deemed as something unnecessary since I started my education to become a lady. I brought them out of the archives where they had been collected only as documentation. It was the first time I saw the fairy-tales conventionally known by all children in society. I read them thoroughly. I was fascinated by this pleasant and wonderful words. The protagonists who lived in these mysterious worlds would always find happiness at the end even if they were poor, ugly or bullied. And I yearned for such stories.

But such days didn't last for long.

One day as I was reading, I heard a voice from the window. When I raised my head, mother and Silvia were there. While I was a bit surprised at the appearance of this half-sister I seldomly met, I observed them. The window glass and the roses grown by mother were between us but the distance wasn't that wide. When I strained my ears,

I caught their words. As usual, my little sister was very beautiful. While I was staring at her with admiration, suddenly, that little face looked toward me.

And then, she smiled.

At once, I fell from the chair and crouched under the desk to hide, hugging my knees in my arms. I didn't want to be found by anyone. Because that's was my room. "The room only for me"..... it was my secret place. When I was trying to settle my pounding heart and hold my breath,

"What is it? Silvia?"

I heard mother's voice.

"Just now, there was someone here."

"...Someone?"

"Yup."

"Well, that should not be possible. You see, this room is empty. There shouldn't be anyone in it."

"Is that right?"

"Yes. It hasn't been used for a long time."

"Hmm."

"It's strange" said a voice that sounded to be pouting. *You are right, it is strange*, replied mother with laughter contained in her voice. Even though I could no longer confirm their expression, I could imagine their faces as they laughed together.

I thought it was great I wasn't found out. But, I also wondered why they didn't try to find me. I shouldn't have wanted to be discovered, but I wished to be.

.....That was probably how I felt.

“How is your condition?”

When I looked up, Marianne was tilting her head, her beautiful eyebrows slightly creased. Since I stayed in bed for a few days because I was feverish, my body felt heavy. Moreover, my right arm had received a few stitches, I had a hard time even simply raising my upper body from the bed. Right now, I could sit up because several pillows were packed behind my back, but with only my own strength, I would use up all the force in my body to sit up.

“I am considerably fine but... I am thinking of taking a few more days of rest.”

When I said that, Marianne who was sitting on the chair by the beside let out a little sigh. Despite the fact she looked unhappy and distressed, today as well, she had a gorgeous beauty. Her hairs which seemed to be sprinkled with gold dust was reflecting the faint light inside the room, looking like it a halo was shining. Even the white wall paper appeared to fade away in her dazzling presence.

“I heard you were hurt but I did not expect you to be in such... a state.”

Marianne who managed to clearly convey her emotion despite using ambiguous words, was a noble though and through. I, who was in “such a state” like she said, could only laugh and say,

“My injury is not really problematic. I simply need to rest because of the high fever. I just have to be careful and take care. The fever is already gone.”

Staring at me without saying anything, Marianne sighed once again. Then, she gently touched the right hand I had injured. Although I screamed in pain when it was sutured,

it seemed it wasn't unusual for a patient to struggle even for a wound like mine, neither deep nor shallow, and the doctor had praised me, saying "You endured it well." He then added while shaking his head in pity that it was rare for a young aristocrat lady to sustain such an important wound. The person who were not used to pain might even had faint long ago. "In the past, did you receive a serious injury somewhere?" It wasn't like he was doubting me, but when he asked me that question with such a deep wondering and surprised expression, I could only hang my head.

In this life, I had never sustained any injury.

But in the lives I had experienced, I had. I even had to endure the pain of giving birth. As well as all the pain I felt when my life ended.

"...Will a scar remain?"

The question that was softly asked like something weighting on the end of your tongue but you were forced to push out, was probably what she wanted the most to hear about.

"Ah, the scar, right... The doctor said there will probably be one, yes. Because, aside from the depth of the wound, it seems that injuries caused by an edged tool often leave a mark."

"...An edge tool, you said?"

Even though I answered her question, she appeared to be more bothered by "what" had caused the wound than the remaining scar.

"The details are... a bit hard to explain..."

But I said that and smiled with a troubled expression that showed I didn't wish for her to continue to enquire about it.

“Ilya-sama.”

“Yes.”

“...I think it is not something I should say but, there is a tendency to avoid bloodshed in the high society.”

I didn't know whether you could call what happened between mother and me a bloodshed. But, what actually happened and how other people perceived it were two different stories. When a noble daughter who shouldn't be exposed to dispute was wounded, you couldn't think about many causes and explanations. Everyone would think she got involved in some kind of quarrel. Or maybe, she was the one who caused it. Actually, since the wound of my arm was caused by a knife, even if you called it an accident, it is an injury someone else gave me. If you didn't call this a quarrel, I didn't know how to name it.

“And Soleil-sama is?”

Seeing me so quiet, Marianne bent her body forward and asked me that question.

“He has been told I was hurt.”

“Then, did he say anything?”

“...Because this matter was reported via a letter, the response has yet to come...”

“Is that so.”

“But, later today, we are supposed to meet.”

Even though I myself thought I was stupid for having such a reaction, but when I imagined that oncoming moment, I felt my fingers shake. I did not think he would break our engagement. If a substitute could be used so easily, we wouldn't have fallen in such a complex situation to begin with. Besides, a scar was something that could be hidden by wearing long sleeves, and in the first place aristocrats wouldn't expose their

skin so much. Even if I were to wear long sleeves in the middle of summer, no one would question it. For an event like a ball, we didn't use long-sleeves dresses, but then I only needed to wear gloves. In summary, I had many ways to hide it. Regarding the persons who would make too many inquiries about it, I would simply stay quiet and laugh. After all, as Soleil's fiancé, I was someone who would soon enter the marquis' household. This simple fact should be enough to keep other in check.

However, it was also true that I couldn't say this reasoning was absolute. Even though it was a fixed position I never managed to get separated from, not only in this life but in all the precedent ones, with only this mere scar, I might lose it. That's right. With only this "mere scar". Compared to all the things I had done until now, injuring my arms wasn't a big deal. Yet...

"Ilya-sama..."

Marianne made a saddened expression. Her hand approached me and patted my arm from right to left to gently comfort me. Because it was on top of my bandages it was hard to tell, but I sensed it gently brush my hand. Since I received the doctor's examination, she had been the only person to do that. Neither father nor mother had showed up since that day. Silvia had come many times in the room, but because everything was hazy due to my high fever, I didn't remember having held a real conversation with her. After my fever fell down, maybe she hesitated, or was stopped by our parents, but this time she hadn't come. It's me who had driven away her extended hand, yet for some reason, my little sister's attitude made me feel hurt.

"Marianne-sama, I..." *am alright*, was what I thought to say but the words didn't come out.

My voice called out her name then stopped unnaturally. For a little while, we stared at each other. The more I thought I should say something, the more nothing would come out. And so, I kept opening and closing my mouth. I repeated that stupid motions. Seeing me like this, she made an intense and earnest expression and drew closer to me. "Because no one else is here, if you want to have a secret talk, it is now or never." After saying so in a whispering voice, she leaned her ear toward me. Confronted to this attitude that seemed to say she wouldn't fail to hear even the smallest voice, strength

suddenly left me.

“...Marianne-sama, do you remember what you once told me in the library of the academy?”

While I thought not even one word would come out, a question even I wasn't aware I had smoothly escaped my mouth. Her eyes decorated by these golden eyebrows that added a touch of charm blinked once. Then, she deeply nodded,

“Of course. My feelings haven't changed since that time, Ilya-sama.”

“..”

“If there is anything I can do, you can ask me anytime. No matter what it is.”

There wasn't the slightest trace of hesitation in that smiling figure. No matter how absurd a promise it may sound nor how preposterous my request might be, because that promise was made by her, who came from the first-ranked count's house, she would surely mostly fulfill it. That's precisely why,

“Won't you ask me the reason? The reason why I would borrow your hand, Marianne-sama?”

I couldn't not confirm it. For a few seconds her eyes wandered around, indecisive. But it only lasted a brief instant. She corrected her posture that was leaning toward me and stretching out her back, she declared,

“This is not necessary. I am thinking like this. Would it not be fine if at least once in my life, I tried to do my utmost for a friend?”

But as expected, I cannot put my life on the line, she said, giving me a broad and elegant smile. Her words made me gasp in surprise. No matter how many times I repeated my

life, a friend who would tell me such words never appeared. I had always been alone, unable to move.

“...I do not remember having done anything that would make you go so far...”

My perplexity exceeded my joy or happiness. I was plainly bewildered.

“Ilya-sama. I do not understand well what the thing called friendship is... Because I am someone who live in the aristocratic world, I even doubt if such a thing exists to begin with.”

“...Well, I guess you are right.”

“But, if it is about love, I think I understand.”

“...About love?”

“Yes. Because I believe in the existence of love. I also think there exists a love that can be offered to my friends. And also, there is no need to have a reason to love.”

“ ... ”

“And so, Ilya-sama, I want to offer you my friendship.”

She said this as if she was someone who had never seen the dark side of the world. These words of her, a person who had probably only live in a place basking in soft sunshine, emitted a kind of radiance and sunk into my chest. I frantically endured the urge to cry. Waterdrops fell down one by one, despite my dried-up soul.

I was lonely, pained, and sad. But, right now, for a short moment, it wasn't the only emotions I felt. To clear away my blurring vision, I strongly closed my eyes. After staying like this for a little while, when I opened them, I saw her looking at me in wonder.

“...Then, I will take my leave soon.” She said as she stood up.

“...It is already time?”

I tried to pretend as much as possible to not care about it, but I didn't know if I manage to do it well. She tilted her head a little and made a bitter smile.

“Well, it seems Soleil-sama will also come soon. Today, I only came to see how you were doing, Ilya-sama.”

I tried to get up to see Marianne off, but my left hand unreliably slipped on the sheets. Still, I tried to correct my posture but in a fluttered Marianne told me, “Please, stay like this,” while pushing down my shoulders. In fact it was difficult and painful to raise my upper body so while I was apologetic, I still accepted her offer. Quite satisfied with my attitude, she bowed her head and left.

As I was following her retreating back with my eyes, she looked over her shoulder.

“Ilya-sama, sometimes in life, there are occasions when you cannot achieve anything with your own strength alone.”

“...Well, yes... that is true.”

I couldn't guess the true meaning she was hinting at. Marianne gaze wandered around, somewhat vacant. Was she looking in the distance, or was she looking at something that was distant? Anyhow, her line of sight was directed toward me, but it seemed she wasn't looking at me.

“There are people who say fate can be changed. We call it fate precisely because it is something that cannot be altered no matter how we try to change it. If you manage to change it, that means it is already no longer your destiny. And...”

“And?”

“And I think the things that absolutely cannot be avoided are called predestinated.”

“...Predestinated...”

“No, it’s not quite right. Rather than saying you cannot avoided them, there are some things that shouldn’t be avoided.”

.....They shouldn’t be avoided.

“It’s precisely because you ought to never avoid them that they might be changeable and uncertain.”

Talking slowly as if carefully selecting each word, she was no longer smiling. Her face that didn’t show any emotion and her fingertips that were completely unmoving made her looked like a puppet. As if she was manipulated by “something.” Her tone was cold, apathic, unimpressive. Chills run down my back.

“...Oh, that’s quite unusual.”

But, unconcerned by what I was thinking, Marianne suddenly exclaimed with an idiotic voice. This time, a distinctive expression of surprise appeared on her face. As if she had forgotten what she was talking about a moment ago. Her gaze went pass me, directed to the further window from the entrance of the room.

“It’s a black bird.”

The one who gasped in surprise, was it me, or was it her? When I turned over, on the fence outside the window, there truly was a bird perched there, a bird whose feathers seemed to have been coat with ebony. Just as extended a hand toward Crow, I realized his eyes were the same color as its feathers. The Crow who sometimes imitated the appearance of a bird, had amber eyes, so I knew it wasn’t him.

But, but.

“...Marianne-sama, do you know the name of that bird?”

“No. I have never seen a bird such like this one. A pitch-black bird...”

While we were talking, the black bird flapped its wings and flew off.

“No, I was wrong. Ilya-sama, as expected, I might have seen it wrongly. Black birds are not something that is supposed to exist. Surely, it must have been dark grey. Or maybe, a deep, dark blue like the color at the bottom of the sea.”

Marianne’s laughing voice echoed from a distance. The first time Crow came, he had said,

“Do you know my name?”

“My name is Crow.”

.....The bird portentous of ill omen.

Chapter 38

If this is the real end (21)

"It's too late, the calamity and misfortune are already happening," was what I answered him in a far, very far away life. But in fact, I didn't really remember when that misfortune had started. The beginning of my repeating lives was always the tea party where Soleil was introduced to Silvia. That's why I had thought like this.

The beginning of everything was that tea party.

If exactly as Marianne had said, there were in life events that couldn't be avoided, then that tea party could be counted among their numbers. Because at this point in time where the tea party unfold, I, who didn't know I was a person with the unique characteristic of always repeating the same time again and again, inevitably introduced them to each other. In other words, it was because their encounter was inevitable that it could be called fate. It was also at that moment I would realize fate was something which could not be changed.

".....Ilya-sama?"

Marianne who was about to leave the room turned back. The door was opened and a maid of our house was waiting there, looking toward us. I also saw the servant Marianne had brought along with her.

"...Ah, no, no I am fine."

She had only called out my name but when I looked at her face I realized she was worried for me. Even though she was shaking her head, I already had one foot out of the bed. It was an action I made, urged by a feeling of uneasiness. "...What happened to you?" she asked me but my heart was gradually beating faster and faster, and I lost my calm. In an incoherent muttering, I repeated "I am fine," but I tumbled and fell from the bed. "My lady!" Reacting quicker than Marianne who tried to help me, the maid

rushed in the room in a fluster. While I was still on my knees, clinging to the maid who was trying to help me up, I asked her, "...Silvia is?" Although it was a maid attached to my service, we had never talked beyond necessary. That's why she made an expression as if I had just spoken cryptic words. I simply wanted to ask her where was my little sister, but by just saying her name my intention wasn't transmitted. Once again, I tried to repeat the same question, but I realized the inside of my mouth was dried up and parched.

"If this is hell. If you're receiving your punishment. Then, what kind of sin did you commit?"

Crow's voice echoed inside my head. Since this life never went well even if I repeated it, I had concluded that maybe, there was no point, no meaning in returning back in time. The one who created a stir and raised a question about this way of thinking was him. And then, the me at that time thought like this.

.....I wanted to find happiness. I dreamed of a life I could spend together with my beloved person. In other words, it was the same as tearing apart the two persons who had been tied together by fate.

It was the same as wishing for someone's unhappiness. I was convinced this was exactly what started the beginning of this hell. However, this was no more than the guess I made myself, I, a person whose head was thrown in disorder and despaired because of my repeating lives.

"Why is it happening to you and you alone?"

"Why is it only you that repeat the same time?"

The overlapping whispers, like a phantom's voice, pushed me into a corner.

"Silvia is, right now, where is she?"

These last few days, I couldn't leave my bed, so I quite couldn't pour strength in my

legs. "...Silvia-sama?" The young maid who looked at me at point-blank range frown. Then, she shook her head, her shoulders a little stiff, "I do not know." She may have been ordered to not say anything so that Silvia and I won't come in contact. The maid's arm I was gripping was obviously tense.

"Ilya-sama, are you really fine?"

Now that I had finally managed to stand up straight with the support of the maid, Marianne looked into my face. Afraid she would perceive my unrest, I reflexively turned my head away, but I realized doing that was much more unnatural. The simple fact of staying calm was difficult.

"...Marianne-sama."

"?"

"The things I cannot avoid... No, the fate that mustn't be avoid, if I were to avoid it, what on earth would happen?"

I wasn't expecting an answer. In fact, Marianne was tilting her head, making a bewildered expression. Although she had spoken of the essence and true nature of "fate" just a while ago, nothing of the sort remained in her. This may be the intention of the existence ordinary persons like us couldn't comprehend, the purpose of this force that exceeded human's knowledge.

Such an existence would surely be what people called god.

If that was the case, then I'm afraid I was probably, going against god's will. Yes, that's why. That may be why I had fallen into this hell. I had distorted fate. Then the price I had to pay for this was...

"...I am deeply sorry, Marianne-sama. I must go."

Aware that I was a bit rude, I gently pushed Marianne aside. "...Ilya-sama?" She had

taken a step forth, about to follow me, but then she was overwhelmed by the severe atmosphere and stopped on her track, noticing what was happening wasn't a trivial matter. As I couldn't tell her my circumstances, I stirred up her suspicion. I knew that, but when that voice called out my name, I couldn't turn back. I will collapse if I didn't clench my teeth and endure the pain. But each step I took, I ascertained the sensation of the carpet under my feet and became able to walk firmly. Maybe I was rousing myself up, or maybe my will had nothing to do in this.

I called out Marianne's servant who was on standby at the entrance to exchange place with him and leave the room. When the preparations of the carriage that will take them home will be ready, the servants of our house will inform them. The moment the door was closed, I felt like I heard my name being called again, but I didn't turn back in the end.

"...Is Silvia currently out of the house?"

When I questioned the maid who had come with me, her gaze wandered for a brief second. She was probably thinking of what kind of excuses she could make up. But as a result, this casual gesture of her answered my question. No matter how many times I experienced it, I could never get accustomed to the sensation of my blood withdrawing from my face and extremities. My fingertips abruptly lost their warmth, the pulsation of my heart speeded up. Even though I understood my body was acting strangely, there was nothing I could do to prevent it and the thoughts in the back of my head jumbled, wondering in a panic, *what should I do? What should I do?*

"Lady?"

Leaving alone the puzzled maid, I followed the corridor. Since I knew guests were coming today, I was wearing an indoor dress, it shouldn't be unsightly. Although its quality was clearly different from what I wear when I went outside, it was still something made to be worn by a noble young lady, so it was still a very valuable clothing. On such occasion, the mediocrity of my face was useful. If this dress was put on a woman like Marianne, who you could guess was a noble just by seeing her gorgeous look, then it would become obvious how this clothing wasn't made to be worn outside. Therefore, it would attract people's gaze. However, that wasn't true in

my case. For example, even if I went downtown like this, no one would point at me to criticize my attire. This dress was plain but it perfectly fulfilled its role as street clothes. The fact I had mediocre features while I lived in a gorgeous world had always festered an inferiority complex in me. Today was the only day I thought it might not be such a bad thing. When I exhaled a long breath, a self-deprecating laugh also escaped my lips.

“My lady, where are you going?”

“...To Silvia.”

“Silvia-sama?”

“Yes.”

I was stimulated to move by the sole thought that I had to chase after her. I had a destination in mind. I already knew where that child would be.

“...My lady!”

As I only looked ahead and proceeded forward with determination, the maid walking behind me called out. I could have ignored her, but her voice that sounded as if she was at her wit's end made me felt uneasy and I unconsciously turned back. Since I was about to get down a staircase, I looked at her while standing in an unnatural position, and saw a servant appeared behind her. Seeing how rough his breathing was, he must have run to chase after us. As the maid was looking at this chamberlain who could still be called a boy based on his young features, I also moved my line of sight toward him. The servant who had probably received permission to speak suddenly gasped then tried to talk. He was probably faltering while facing me as I wasn't wearing a very calm expression right now.

“M-my lady, Soleil-sama has come. Since some time ago already, he has been waiting in the parlor.”

He was a lot earlier than the prior informed time. However, he was the son of a marquis and my fiancé, he should not have to wait in another room. Did he know that Marianne was here, or was he simply showing some restraint and thoughtfulness because I had a guest? In any case, he had certainly taken my situation into consideration. Even if I was in the middle of receiving a guest, if it was him, no one would blame him if he were to intrude in my room.

“What would you like to do?” When I was asked that question, before giving an answer, my feet started moving on their own.

.....The stage was set. But only the chosen persons would stand under the spotlight. Each and everyone of them would have to carry their own role, guiding the story toward its demise. I had been granted the role of making them stand on that stage. That was precisely why I couldn’t become one of the actors.

“I wonder if Soleil-sama has a sword?”

When I stopped trying to go down the staircase leading to the entrance hall and turned back, the maid and chamberlain behind me showed a bewildered expression. No one caught my muttered words.



“I would like to receive an explanation from you but,”

A possible description of this color would be the blue sky being reflected on ice floating on water. Looking at Soleil’s eyes, I casually thought such a thing. It might be because there were only the two of us in this narrow room, I couldn’t help but have such thoughts. Although I was the one who made things become like this, I was completely perplexed.

When my vision was suddenly shaken, I knew the carriage we were riding on had finally started moving.

“You’re still in convalescence. Is it really fine for you to go out?”

When asked such a question, I quietly nodded. It would be hard to say I was fine, but saying I wouldn’t be alright was also not completely true. Maybe he had sensed it, but he frowned and added, “You don’t look like you are alright.” The reason I reflexively averted my gaze at that moment was because I didn’t have the composure to receive it. In other words, I neither acquiesced nor denied his words. I guess that, due to this situation, or because of the nature of this gesture itself, it became a very ambiguous answer. Making the other understand your own mental state was terribly difficult. It was especially true for me.

Until now I always perceived the ups and downs of my emotions, and every time my choppy heart was pierced by it. As if an uneven ground was trampled and forced to become smooth.

Nevertheless, it was easy to see that currently, the both of us were bewildered. He was probably even more perplex than me. After all, even I who understood the situation was so shaken and disturbed by it.

“I already told you earlier, but there is a place I must go no matter what. Even though you have taken great pains to come to the estate, I apologize but...”

“...No.”

Soleil who shook his head to indicate he didn’t care about it didn’t avert his gaze from me even for a moment. As if he was trying to peer into the depth of my heart.

Although we had just departed, we were sitting side by side in the carriage which moved with such speed it seemed it was being driven quite recklessly. As the wheels were making a loud clattering noise, we couldn’t hear what the other said unless we rose our voices. For this reason, we inevitably had to bring our heads close to each other’s to talk. It may have been the first time since we were children that we were talking at such a close distance. Even at that time, I couldn’t say we had exchange a lot of words, but we had still laughed together. Now it had already become a thing of the distant past. It was all the more distant due to the years I had unremittingly repeated after the tea party.

“Don’t you have a fever? Your complexion is bad and you are trembling.”

Soleil softly patted my shoulder. It was a gentle gesture like touching something delicate. Due to the too-close distance, I could see the details of his face well. Normally, his expression should be harder to read than when I saw it at a distance. Yet, I could read his expression to the point of understanding it even too much because of the length of the time we had spent together. For a third party, he would still appear like someone whose thoughts are impossible to guess.

“Soleil-sama, I want you to listen to my request.”

His hand slid down my shoulder and stroke my back. There wasn’t any hesitation in his gesture, as if he was doing it all the time.

“You have been like this since a while ago. But you won’t clearly tell me what you want. And so, I don’t know what I should do, I can’t decide whether it’s right to heed your wish or not.”

Although he was quite direct in his speech, it didn’t feel like he was rejecting me. His eyes were only looking at me. His ears were listening closely to my voice as if to not miss a single word. His face inclined in diagonal seemed to exude gentleness. When I stared in his eyes, it’s almost as if I would misunderstand him and think he understood my feelings. In fact, you could say I was extremely conceited. And so, the several “me” from all the accumulated lives were sending me warnings. But no matter how many lives one would live, the true nature of a person wouldn’t change. I was always trying to trust him. Even though I already knew how foolish it was, I always repeated the same fault.

“...Ilya...?”

“Soleil-sama, if you could promise me to protect one thing, everything would be fine.”

“...One thing?”

“Yes.”

I took his hand that was stroking my back and tightly clenched it. From how rugged the palm of his hand was, I could tell how much training he must have gone through. It wasn't like today was the first time our hands connected. Since I always attended balls as his fiancé, I had danced hand in hand with him. But despite this, I wasn't familiar with the palm of his hand. It wasn't like he didn't exert great efforts too. I realized anew that, in order to bear the responsibility of becoming the future marquis, he had devoted himself to his studies like me. The fact I only realized it this late was because I was always thinking of myself only.

I, who stood beside him as his equal, always steeled myself. After all, I needed to think. I always wondered if I was a suitable person for him, how I appeared in others people's view, if I was acting appropriately for a lady.

.....I had always been thinking about myself only.

“From now on, no matter what happens, please be sure to protect my little sister without fault.”

“...Your sister? You mean Silvia?”

Because I couldn't enclose this whole big hand with mine, I was only clenching his fingers. Despite being surprised at my unusual action, maybe it was a reflex, but he also squeezed my hand back.

“What the hell is going to happen? What the hell are you trying to do?”

The carriage suddenly shook and both our bodies lightly jumped off our seat. Without anything to support it, my body fell down, but he caught me by the arm and stopped my fall. “It's dangerous,” his breathing hit my cheek. I felt a scorching pain at the sensation of being in contact with his skin at such an excessively close distance. We had once lived together as a married couple. But physical distance and the distance of

our hearts were two different things. Even if his body was by my side, it didn't mean his heart was close too.

Even now it was the same but.....

But it felt like his heart was slightly closer than usual.

When he came to our house supposedly to visit me, he had prepared a bouquet of flowers. If it was only this, I might have paid no heed to this gesture of basic etiquette. It wasn't unusual to bring flowers when visiting someone sick. On the contrary, coming empty hand was the same as showing impoliteness to the other party. He had surely not thought deeply about this and only followed proper manners. Since he was a gentleman, even if he didn't favor me he wouldn't lack courtesy.

However, the flowers he had chosen, were white.

It was a bouquet composed of a variety of flowers of different sizes, and maybe he purchased it at a florist but several expensive flowers with large petals were mixed in it. It was as if, among all the vividly colorful flowers existing, he had only picked and gathered the white ones. Originally, white flowers were offered to the deceased. You couldn't say they were a good omen. If one were to receive such flowers, no one would complain if they cursed and accused the other of being rude. But, since the one they were for was me, it was a different story.

I had never said it even once, yet he knew. He knew the color I liked... the flowers I liked.

".....Soleil-sama, today, what did you come to our house for?"

"...What? Ah, no, but, for seeing you since you are unwell."

Despite the abrupt change of topic, he faithfully answered.

"Yes, that is right. I know that. I am very grateful for your thoughtfulness. However, that is not the only reason you came, right?"

"..."

I sent a letter saying I injured myself. I told him I would take a leave of absence from the academy for a little while. I used a roundabout way to tell him that depending on the situation our engagement might be broken, but I said it in a way he would surely understand. However, there was no answer. He didn't say anything. Then, suddenly, he came to visit me. This meant he had something to say that should be said directly in person rather than writing it in a letter. Saying he had only come to see me had no persuasiveness at all.

“...that you didn't need to worry about anything.”

Inside the carriage which once again shook greatly, his words were very hard to catch. He must have guessed it. So he took one deep breath and,

“I wanted to tell you that you didn't need to be anxious about anything.” He told me.

“In the letter, you didn't explain anything, neither how you were injured, what you were worried about... But when I looked at you lately, I sensed that something was troubling you. That's why I wanted to tell this to you in person properly.”

He said this slowly, as if he was measuring or choosing each word cautiously.

“.....”

The fact my heart was quivering was surely because of his words. In the depths of my heart, in a place where there was originally nothing, something I couldn't catch a glimpse jolted and made a sound.

“...Behind your injury, there must be some deep circumstances. I hope you will tell me about it someday when you'll feel you can talk. I won't press you to speak. Besides,”

“...”

“If it’s a question of time, from now on, we’ll have plenty of it.”

In my blurring field of vision, I could see Soleil’s face. If I didn’t close my eyes, I will cry. I was aware of this but I couldn’t even blink. I didn’t think he would say these words. There were words I had kept telling myself any number of times.

“From now on, I’ll have plenty of time. So, it’s fine. One day, we, will become close to each other and live together.”

I whispered this again and again and again. I remembered that.

“Just hearing these words...”

Is enough, was what I intended to say but my voice didn’t come out. But even without saying it he should have understood. His eyes widened and he whispered,

“Why are you saying that... It almost like this is the last time we talk. That’s how it sounds to me.”

It wasn’t like everything could be written off because of one event. I lived lives he didn’t know about. Each time, I tasted despair. I couldn’t write off all of them. Because it was all the experience I accumulated in them that formed the “current me.”

That’s why I no longer wanted to deny “myself.”

“Soleil-sama, if you cherish me even a little, won’t you please grant my request?”

“Ilya.”

“This is a stage prepared for Silvia’s sake. That’s why, I am fine. It is alright. But, that

child needs you. For this child, it can only be you, Soleil-sama. That's why, please, I beg you. Won't you please save that child?"

"Ilya, what the hell are you talking about? I don't understand. I cannot understand anything. In that situation, it's impossible for me to move as you wish...!"

"...No, no it is fine. Soleil-sama, I am sure you understand. What is it that you ought to do..."

I hit the middle of his chest with my index finger.

"I am sure your soul knows."

Soleil kept blinking, making an expression as if he had been attacked by an enemy in an unguard moment, and brushed off my finger. Then, immediately, he seized my arm.

"What are you talking about Ilya. What the hell are you trying to say."

"...Soleil-sama,"

Please, swear it to me, the words I repeated disappeared under the noise of the wheels.

"There is something wrong with you! What you are saying is strange. You seem almost like you aren't yourself. Ilya, why the hell are you doing this?"

A sharp pain ran through the arms he grasped strongly. Now that I noticed, it was the arm on where was the wound. I reflexively brushed off his hand, my features distorted in pain. I felt I could bear the pain by doing that.

In truth, I wanted to grasp his hand.

Even if I struggled fiercely and drown him under jeers, I wanted him to swear to never ever let go of me. No matter how stained and corrupted this body was, if these hands

could simply embrace me tightly, I would be satisfied with only this.

“I am, Ilya Il Machisse.”

If, a personality was something you were born with and then was shaped by all the experienced accumulated thereafter, then I was probably not the “Ilya’ he knew.

The Ilya who only looked at him. The Ilya who only wanted him. The Ilya who didn’t need anything apart from him. Even though this was true, the old me wanted a lot of things. The affection of my parents might have been one of these things. Besides, the reason why I exerted so much efforts to become a person worthy of the marquis’ house was because I wanted to be recognized by the high society. Even Soleil’s parents, I wanted them to take a liking to me, I also thought of wanting to triumph over all the person who opposed our engagement.

“Ilya would not look at me with such eyes.”

When I opened my closed eyes, Soleil said, “Where did she go?” There was something that sounded quite plaintive in his trembling voice. For a while, I lost my voice. It was almost like Soleil was searching for me. For the me who should no longer be here anymore. The me before I repeated the same time. In other words.....

For the me who existed before the tea party.

At once, I answered back, “I am the only me, and I was here since the beginning.” However, he directed a dubious gaze at me. And so, I grasped his hand once again. He twitched an eyebrow and shivered, yet he didn’t clutch my hand back. Then, he whispered in a faint voice,

“Just now, it was you who spoke?”

“...Eh?”

“Was it you who said that if I cherish you even a little, you wanted me to grant you request.”

“Yes.

“Isn’t it obvious I hold you dear? You are my fiancé.”

“...Yes, that is true... That is true...”

I wondered if this could be taken as his promise to grant my wish? I sighed and inhaled, trying to calm down and get ride of my impatience. The same noise of the carriage wheels and the horses stomping on the ground was still echoing, yet like an illusion, the inside of the carriage fell in a deep silence. “Ilya?” My name was called and I could sense his anxiety from his tone and this mood.

“Soleil-sama, there is something about Silvia I need to talk with you.”

Even though there was no one else but us I lowered my voice. Maybe he didn’t hear me well but Soleil tilted his head toward me. So, I talked to him as if I was resting my head on his shoulder.

“...About Silvia?”

“Yes. About her birth, and her parents.”

“What?”

What are you talking about out of the blue? Soleil’s voice filled of surprise at this unexpected topic resounded in my ear. I didn’t know if what I was doing was right. But, I thought I wasn’t wrong. The fact I was still a bit reticent and uneasy was because betraying the secret of someone else brought along feelings of guilt. When I became unable to bear these feelings, I quietly looked outside the window.

Seeing the unfamiliar scenery, I understood we were quite far from the town.

It was naturally me who told the destination to the coachman. When I ordered him to drive at the fastest speed he could, that person holding the bridles had opened his eyes wide. Then he explained with a few words the itinerary until our destination.

In terms of distance, the shortest path was to go through the town. However, we couldn't make the horses run in the middle of the city. So, rather than going through the town at a safe speed, he explained it would be better to make a detour and have the horses run at full speed.

Just by hearing his words, you might think he was quite considerate and enthusiastic about his work. But under his hat his gaze held a slight curiosity. He didn't say it, but there was no doubt he wanted to ask, "what the hell do you need to go to that place for."

We were heading toward that place.

"...What do you mean?"

Soleil's low voice and breath hit my earlobe. When I retrieved my gaze from the window, I met his piercing gaze.

".....Silvia's life is being targeted."

That was my conclusion. That child's life was being targeted by someone. That person wasn't my mother who had mixed drugs in her tea. That was completely a personal intuition.

If I believed in the fatalism, the inevitable fate Marianne had spoken of. Then, the "destiny" I had avoided in all my lives until now, wasn't it, in other words, the tragedy Silvia encountered in my first life? In my second life and thereafter, I moved around so that Silvia wouldn't lose her life in this tragedy. As a result, that child continued to live safely after that time. But as a result, she was attacked by a disease and died. How about the lives after that?

I didn't know when it started, but at some point, even if I didn't do my utmost to protect her, that child wouldn't encounter that situation where she was attacked by robbers.

Everything had started on that tea party day.....? No, that was wrong. It's only the place where my life start repeating. So, I misunderstood. The starting point of my

repeating life wasn't that calm afternoon.

The beginning of everything was. That summer, that "fateful day." Yes, wasn't it that day Silvia was assailed by robbers and died?

Fate leads. Everything comes back to that day.

That day Silvia died for the first time.

Chapter 39

If this is the real end (22)

.....I remembered a ribbon stained in blood.

That day Silvia had gone to the theater to take a breather. It wasn't something planned in advance, on the contrary I heard she went out on a whim when the idea suddenly occurred to her. But, this was only the story from Silvia's side. For another person, it might have not been an unexpected event, it might have been something completely inside their expectation. For example, at that time, there might have been someone who told her, "From time to time, why not going out of the estate for a change?" If you heard she had been lying in bed due to an illness a few days before, then you could guess my little sister would happily follow this advice.

They might have told to the Silvia who was always spending all her time indoor that it would affect her health negatively.

The person herself had said it, but all that was permitted to that child was to take a walk and read. The servants won't speak more than necessary in front of their masters, and more than anything they had their own work to do. No matter how much precedence was given to Silvia, they couldn't look after that child all day long. Even if she went on a walk, it was only walking around the mansion or strolling in the garden. Moreover it was an habit she had from childhood, you could easily guess she must have gotten bored of this overly familiar scenery. When that girl who always slept a lot said she wanted to go to town, even the people around us didn't strongly try to stop her. They were probably thinking among those lines, *it's fine once in a while, she should be allowed at least this much.*

However, wasn't that tragedy entitled, "murdered by robbers," orchestrated by human hands?

In my second life, I had yet to know of Silvia's birth and circumstances. Yet I still felt it might be someone's plot. But the me at that time didn't think the aim of that tragedy was to injure Silvia, I thought it was a scheme to make me, the fiancé of Soleil, fall. In fact, I think this wasn't a mistake either. For someone who thought I was in the way, it was a unique opportunity. Because by using Silvia's death, they were able to drag me

from the position of Soleil's fiancé to that of a sinner.

.....But that was not where the point of the issue lay in the first place. I could only say I didn't reach the right conclusion because I only focused on myself and didn't consider other things. In spite of concluding I couldn't become a supporting character in this story, I still perceived myself as an important key figure.

"...You said something is going to happen to Silvia? What is it?"

Soleil who went down the carriage first naturally held his hand for me. If we weren't in such a situation, my expression would surely softened just thanks to this gesture. I could easily picture such a me. When I put my fingers in the palm of his hand, he grasped them gently as if to scoop them up. For Soleil, if the person he interacted with was a woman, he would behave like a gentleman without being flustered. That's why his line of sight had already moved away from me and was examining our surrounding. Maybe because he had already heard the story of Silvia's upbringing, but he was vigilant. His gaze slid over the thick forest of broadleaf trees and while he was at it he confirmed the color of the sky.

I remembered how, in one of my lives, just after our marriage he distinguished himself as a knight. And I remembered the letters he sent me when the chivalric order he belonged to went on expeditions. They were blunt and curt letters. They were written with unconcerned sentences in which I wouldn't see the slightest bit of emotion.

I even recalled how I cherished such letters like a treasure.

"Besides, why do you know Silvia is being targeted?"

The eyes of Soleil who suddenly turned back toward me were sharp. This glare looked like it contained anger but he was simply getting worked up. Because for him, this situation came out of the blue. Although he was someone whose facial expressions were hard to read, he might be shaken inwardly. No, he must be shaken. He was still a student of the academy and could only be called a trainee still in apprenticeship. He was supposed to have taken sword lessons since youth, but as a matter of course, he had yet to experience actual fighting. Furthermore, if I dare point it out, you couldn't

call him robust or sturdy as he was still in the midst of building up his body to become a knight. Because he was aiming to become a knight, he wasn't weak. However, this didn't necessarily mean he was tough and strong.

In the first place, we were only two years apart.

When we were children, these two years of difference felt like a huge wall. But now after piling years and keeping repeating lives, the him who was in front of me no longer looked like a child, but I recognized that he had just arrived at the entrance of the age bracket that could be called adulthood. While being cautious of our surrounding, his silhouette as he was trying to protect me in his back certainly looked reliable and trustworthy. But even him was no different from me, he was a noble who should be protected by someone. You could say he was used to being protected too. I was rather astonished by his gentlemanly behavior that absolutely didn't collapsed despite all this.

If this was the fruit of the education he went through since childhood, then... I could see how we were beings that had been "made." We had been trained and cultivated.

That's exactly why he was attracted to Silvia.

"I can only say that "I know.""

A gentle breeze stroked my cheeks and the trees rustled. The countless leaves which rubbed against each other's sounded like they were making merry, exchanging turbulent gossip. When I looked up, countless birds flew high in the sky under the shining sun. In a usual situation, it wouldn't be called an uncommon scene. But these black shadows seemed to foster an ominous and ill omen.

"You sound like a fortuneteller when you say that."

Still holding my hand, Soleil who didn't know what our destination was kept turning back to look at me who walked behind him. There wouldn't be any problem if I were to walk in front, but he didn't approve of it. I had to cede in front of his determination. His sword was hanging at his waist. Normally, even if one belonged to the knight

department, students would almost never wear a sword to go in town. In the first place, because the one going to the academy were nobles, there was no need to. For example, even if you were to encounter robbers and hoodlum, it wouldn't be a problem if you had your servants or escort at your side. That's why, both Soleil and I fully understood the strangeness of the current situation.

At the estate, when I told him it was an emergency and I wanted him to lend me a hand, he was taken aback. But, he probably felt something by seeing the state I was in. When I asked him if he had his sword with him, after slightly bending his head in wonder, he made a little nod. After that, I took him with me and sneaked out of the mansion and found a carriage.

The carriages of my house were all taken, and Soleil's stood out too much. Anyhow, it was the carriage of the marquis' house. Its magnificent appearance didn't look modest. Now, we needed to avoid as much as possible any conduct that could attract public gaze. Beyond the fact we didn't know who was related to this matter, if we were to make an uproar, danger would befall Silvia. That was also the reason I didn't bring servants with us. I didn't know where and who somebody might be listening, and to bring along a servant, I needed to obtain the permission of the steward. It was only that, but it's an action that would greatly stand out. That's why I asked the maid to relay a message to Alfred and didn't take anyone with me.

Honestly, whether Soleil would follow my indications or not was something close to a gamble. He didn't ask much. Not even why we didn't bring along servants. For me just being in Soleil's vicinity made me be on guard, but I found his attitude quite unexpected. It felt quite strange that the him now who was leading me by the hand was the same person as the "him" of my repeated lives.

"However, the fact Silvia is... being targeted by someone is the truth."

Soleil didn't seem like he would believe in things like fortune-telling. That's why the tone of my voice inevitably weakened into a whisper.

"I'm not doubting your words."

Soleil sent a fleeting gaze toward me, looking extremely serious, but for a second, his lips arched in a thin smile. Because he was someone whose expression hardly changed, he was extremely hard to understand. But this gesture made me think he was maybe trying to reassure me.

Inside the carriage, I naturally didn't talk about the fact I had repeated the same time. Nevertheless, I told him the story about Silvia's parents without concealing anything. Although he probably didn't know about that book which was popular in the high society, but I told him what kind of story was behind it in reality. No matter how coherent a story it seemed to be for me, for him this talk must have lacked credibility. I couldn't have objected anything even if I had been told it was a "wild delusion."

"And so, what should I do?"

"...Like I said earlier, if you could simply protect Silvia..."

"...And then?"

"Eh?"

"If I do as you said, then what about you? What will you do?"

He walked in front of me, pushing out the overgrown grass of the way. I already knew the place we ought to go. At that time..... after I heard my little sister had died, because I had been restricted immediately, I didn't know the details of the incident. I only heard the story the prison guards whispered among themselves to kill time. Then, since my life ended in jail, that incident was buried in the dark. Since I, who was deemed to be the criminal, had died, it couldn't be help. In the first place, society had focused on this family quarrel between sisters only as a form of distraction. Probably no one realized the truth. Not even Soleil. It seemed he believed I was jealous of my sister and commit this crime because I hated her.

That's why he convicted me and desired a capital punishment for me. There was almost no doubt about this. Even though he might have very well been the sole person able to uncover the truth. His love for my little sister, his hatred for me, had clouded his judgment.

From my second life and thereafter, I did all I could so that incident itself wouldn't

occur. Eventually, the same event didn't transpire and I wasn't able to learn what happened on the very day Silvia died.

But, if it was the place where to find my little sister, then I knew. That child who was supposed to have gone to the theater in town, was found in a place she should have never passed by on her way back to the mansion.

.....Yes, it was the middle of this forest.

I heard that the carriage of our house my sister rode on was found overturn at a place not far from here. The maid who accompanied her was inside, dead, and all the luggage had been taken. That's why it was judged to be the work of thieves. But, my little sister wasn't found in that place. The band of robbers especially brought that child along with them. Then, deep in the forest, they took her life.

".....Soleil-sama, the one in danger is Silvia. Not me. So..."

I tried to repeat once again "it's alright" like I had said earlier, but my hand was tightly gripped and the words were sealed in my throat. "I don't think it's fine" he whispered, looking straight ahead. What kind of expression did he make while saying this? I gazed at the back of his head but he didn't look back. Although Silvia was being pursued it felt as if it was us who were chasing after someone.

Unexpectedly, humans seemed to be going in and out of this forest. We weren't walking through a trackless path. While tall trees lined up around us, animal trails weaved their ways between them. You could see that several people had come and gone when looking at the place that had been trampled flat.

"...Beyond this, what is here?"

It hadn't been long since we entered the forest. Even so, it felt like we had walked a lot. That was because we were in a hurry and under a lot of pressure. Then, why were we walking? We had got off the carriage because it couldn't enter the forest, and we didn't ride horses because their hooves would make a tremendous sound.

“Do you know?”

He abruptly stopped and turned toward me. Maybe the sunlight was dazzling so he squinted his eyes which were trying to read something from my expression. But I wondered if he didn't find what he wanted as he heaved a little sigh. As we gazed into each other's eyes, staying in that place, it became as if we were the only two persons remaining in the world. Even though I knew it wasn't the moment for this, I thought this moment was precious.

The trees were stirring noise, the grass was undulating, the wind blew.

In this place where there was nothing else, we were all alone. It was quite irrepressibly maddening. The day I met Soleil for the first time, we walked in the marquis's garden together. Exactly the same as now, I was following his back as he walked in front of me. When I approached he went away, when he went away I approached him, I couldn't help but be frustrated. The difference from that time was that right now, we were holding hand. I might have finally been allowed to tread the same path as him. The thing I couldn't help but want, I had it here. But I was aware it was a problem to reach for it now.

As if to prove it, in the distance a stiff scream echoed.

Even though it was the first time I came here, I knew where that child was. Because that winding animal trail was precisely leading us to our destination.

“.....Soleil-sama.”

I didn't need to specifically call him, he already had the eyes of someone about to march into a fight.



We advanced forward, treading on the path illuminated by the sunlight filtering through the trees. It wasn't the time to worry about the noise we made. Pushing our way through the grass that had grown to the same high as our calves, it didn't take long before our field of vision suddenly widened. The number of trees which stretched

out as if competing to grow higher and higher diminished and the blue sky spread out as if a hole was opened. Compared to the path we had been through until now, it became really easy to walk. Short weeds were thriving on this relatively flat ground.

“...Someone, please, someone, help...!!”

This voice didn't seem to carry that much fear and dread. She should have been intended to scream, but that shriek was quite helpless.

“.....Silvia!”

Because I messed up and rose my voice, I gasped. Overwhelmed by impatience, I had called my little sister's name before thinking. I bit my lips, regretting that dangerous mistake. It didn't take long to understand what the hell had I done. Because the eyes of the person trying to take away my little sister moved in our direction.

“Ilya... stand back!”

Soleil quickly drew his sword, standing diagonally in front of me. Three men were standing there, one of them carrying my little sister on his shoulder like a luggage. Although we weren't standing at a distance our hands could reach them, we were close enough to recognize their face. If we spoke up, we could hear each other's words.

“...Ah, it's too bad. Looks like you made it in time.”

Even though it was a tense situation. The one who spoke in an idiotic tone of voice was standing in front. The man in the lead made a smile while tilting his head. I shouldn't have been the only one who received a shock like a strike on your head when seeing that familiar face. No, rather, it was the opposite. Soleil may have been thrown into a greater disarray than me.

“.....Why?”

Even though I was standing behind him, I seemed to hear his heartbeat. It must have been beating very fast, as if it was about to burst out. It probably wasn't my imagination that his back was trembling.

“.....Why?”

High in the sky, songbirds sang. This carefree chirping was completely out of place.

“Sai.”

Soleil called out his name. His voice rang out in my ears like a buzzing sound. Forgetting to even blink, I stared at the face of that person. Like the first time I met him in the back yard of the academy, he was making a very gentle and meek expression. At the same time, a shady looking smile was also pasted to his lips. The same one he had when I met him in the cafeteria. He was always cheerful, always cladded in a pleasant mood. And yet, he would spit out harsh words without breaking his amiable atmosphere.

Saion Topias.

That's how that person with indigo eyes called himself the first time we met.

“Why, you ask? I possibly cannot explain everything in a few words. If I must give you one reason, it's that I also have something I want to protect.”

I wondered if the carriage Silvia had rode on had also been abandoned, toppled on the roadside, like in the past. Also, the maid who was supposed to be accompanying my little sister wasn't here. It meant that the life of one person had already been lost. Realizing this fact made gooseflesh run through my skin, and a thick vein at the base of my neck made a gushing sound.

The man with the largest built right behind Saion was carrying Silvia on his shoulder. Though her delicate body was lighter than average, carrying a person still required quite some efforts. But his body was very stable and he didn't look like he was tired at all. Rather, wasn't he carefreely yawning despite the situation? I guess he didn't feel cornered at all.

"Everything would have been fine if you had obediently stayed in that mansion until you died. That way, I wouldn't have to do such a thing."

Seeing the expression he made while talking, his eyebrows lowered as if he was really troubled by the situation, it made it sounded like we were the one doing something bad.

"...Are you talking about Silvia?"

When I questioned him, he nodded.

"I don't know of far you're aware of Silvia-chan's circumstances but... No, seeing your expression, you already know everything, don't you?"

After giggling with a little smile, he sighed. The sound of his breath seemed to resounded in my ears.

"Right now, my country is in a perilous situation. A few days ago, Her Majesty the Queen passed away... Because she wasn't blessed with a child, the problem of succession has broken out among the royal family. A lot of thing has happened, but well, in any case... The country is now divided in two factions, the abolitionists and the royalists. In that situation... if she, if Silvia-chan were to appear in the front stage... that would be troublesome."

Very troublesome, then interrupting his voice, my little sister yelled, "Big sister!! Soleil-

sama!! Save me...!”

Her voice was much stronger and firmer than earlier. My little sister who was being held in someone’s arms couldn’t raise her face but she seemed to have properly heard mine and Soleil’s voices.

“Silvia-chan. Your voice is absolutely lovely but right now, please be silent.”

Shhh! He told her as if to soothe her. In his attitude there was nothing of the characteristic mercilessness of a human working and committing crime in the shadow. As Saion ordered his fellow countryman, “Put her down,” his voice was lowered than usual. In other words, was he the ringleader of this plot?

“Her Majesty the Queen had a little sister. She already died a long time ago though... That’s right, that was Silvia-chan’s mother.”

Do you understand what I mean when I said it’s troublesome? He asked us.

“To begin with, she is a bother just by being alive.”

In his thin laughing eyes, the sunlight was reflected. I thought his eyes looked black with the influence of the light. However, under this strong sunlight, this indigo pair of eyes of him looked like a dim violet.

What this color indicated was...

“.....I know it’s hard on Silvia-chan. But, just by existing, you put our country at risk.”

As she stood stock still, Silvia’s face abruptly turned pale. That child shouldn’t know anything about her birthplace. But it was possible she had heard it from Saion.

I wondered if she was aware of how much danger she was in?

No emotions were reflected in Saion's eyes as he looked at my little sister's reaction. Even though the soleil hadn't been clouded, his eyes seemed to have stopped taking in the light.

"And so, I was thinking to have you disappear," he said with only his mouth smiling. Reacting to the signal of his words, the man standing beside him put his arm around Silvia's neck to restrict her, and another one prepared his sword. It felt like the air that should have been flowing gently suddenly harden and condensate. My breathing accelerated. It might have been because of the bloodlust they were releasing.

"Ah, and also. There aren't only three of us."

Won't you come out soon? Following his voice, in the gaps between the trees behind them, figures of people appeared. It's at this moment I noticed the sun was beginning to set little by little. The shadows extending from our feet were slightly stretching out. Light and darkness had started to assimilate, the boundaries between them were becoming ambiguous.

"Eh, what kind of emotions are you feeling now? Say, Soleil, won't you tell-me?"

The intonation of his voice was full of ridicule. He looked like a first-class stage actor.

"How does it feel, being betrayed by a friend?"

Had they been hiding until now, or had they just returned here? The outlines of the people blending in the darkness cleared up, fully appearing in front of us.

This head of impressive red hairs, I knew it well.

He was always standing next to Soleil. It had never changed in any of my lives. They should have been calling themselves life-long friends. Then, exactly as those words implied, I knew that afterwards they would always continue to be friends for a long

time. Even after Soleil and I got married their relation won't change and will perdure..... It was supposed to.

But, I remembered. In that prison reeking of mold, he had said to me,

"It's stupid. You're truly a fool... You can try struggling and denying it all you want, but no one can reverse fate."

Chapter 40

If this is the real end (23)

In my first life, I greeted my end in an underground jail. Remembering the exact moment I died was difficult. I writhed in grief, anguish and despair, I thought it was understandable that my memory was vague. And so, even if Soleil's friend came all the way to this place, I couldn't recall the details clearly..... I shouldn't have been able to.

In a sudden flash, the mist in my mind cleared up. I remembered one thing. He, at that time, said he had brought Silvia's ribbon.

As I lay collapsed on the ground, every breath bringing along pain, he told me, *"You better give up and die."* His words were excessively indifferent, but when he whispered *"I'm sorry"* with eyes blurred out by tears, this might have been his way to offer me his compassion. *It's fine to die now*, he might have been trying to tell me that. Then, extending his arm through the iron grid, he gave me Silvia's ribbon.

"...You might say you don't need this, but dying alone is lonely, isn't it? In the place you must go now, your little sister is waiting. So, set your mind at ease."

I probably won't be able to go there through, he said, forcibly putting in my hand the ribbon stained in blood. Even if I was told it was from my little sister, I didn't recognize it and didn't feel anything from holding it. Besides, why did he have something said to belong to my dead little sister? The thought it might have been entrusted to him by Soleil or my parents crossed my mind, but that idea didn't settle in my mind. However, if he had been present when my little sister was attacked by the bandits, then everything would be explained.

Like the current situation.

"Why, are you... here?"

The red hairs man Soleil interrogated..... Edward, titled his head. Then, with a troubled expression he answered, a smile devoid of strength on his lips, "Don't you already know?" *You betrayed me?* My fiancé whispered in a barely audible voice. His back clearly shook, showing how upset he was. In the first place in such a situation, I didn't think there were any person who could maintain their presence of mind.

"Soleil. I think you know that too but, for the sake of the one thing they cherish, humans can do everything and anything."

While his hairs fluttered in the wind like a swaying flame, he declared so. It had a profound meaning. But Edward sank in silence and looked toward Saion. Taking over, Saion shrugged his shoulders and said with exaggeration, *It's not a bad thing to cast away everything to protect what's precious to you.* Then he winked his dark purple eyes. It was strange because his soft narrowed eyes felt like they resemble Silvia's. But I didn't know whether or not there was a blood relationship between them.

"...What are you talking about? What will you do with me? Say, Saion-sama..."

Still restrained by the large-built man, Silvia asked in a small voice. My little sister was wrapped in the still soft light of the setting sun. If this place was a stage, then she was the leading actress bathed in spotlight. Tears spilled over from her eyes similar to amethysts, glittering as they fell on her chest.

"Well, various things happened, I said it earlier, didn't I?"

"...Saion... sama, why. Why are you doing that?"

Maybe he was moved by her crying voice that induced pity, but Saion answered back in an irritated tone, "Ah, alright!"

"Well, it's ok, I guess. I'll explain since you don't have a lot of time left. I said it earlier but, Her Majesty the Queen who passed away wasn't blessed with a child. Currently,

the problem of her succession has broken out..... In other words, it's not that there isn't any successor. Obviously. The royal family could not not have taken any measure in case something happened to Her Majesty, right?"

And so, several successor candidates are currently facing off, aiming for the throne. That's what Saion talked about.

"Among these candidates, there isn't any who is a direct descendant of Her Majesty. Everyone of them had been living in a place far from the crown. Yet... how should I say? They have been chosen. Then, there is my brother-in-law. He was lucky... or should I say unlucky? But he became one of the successor candidates."

With a dry laugh he dropped his eyes.

"I wonder, isn't there anyone who can know what his future is going to be like hereafter?"

He sighed and it felt like his voice had weakened a little. No one could answer his question. Because no one knew. Now, time was overwhelming too short to organize my thoughts regarding this story I heard for the first time. It wasn't a light topic that could be answered after a few seconds of consideration. Saion probably knew it too, as he said, "It's a problem you guys cannot picture either."

"Currently, the royal family is stormy. But a new problem has arisen here. A group advocating the abolition of our monarchy has appeared. And their ulterior motive is to crush in one go our royal family shaken by the problem of succession."

Saion who had rattled on and on until now suddenly drew his sword.

"In the case someone other than my brother-in-law become the king, the people in the way will all be made to disappear. Then again, in the case of the abolitionists winning

the struggle, all of the people related to the royal family will be purged. In other words you see, for my brother-in-law, apart from becoming the next king, there is no other path left.”

I wonder if you guys can understand the feelings of the people born in such a country? Saion said as he readied his sword. Matching his action, the other two men and Edward took a fighting stance. The large built man shoved Silvia away. My little sister who became free tried to move toward us as she staggered but Saion stopped her with his words, “If you move, I’ll kill you.” Silvia’s shoulders shook and she stopped where she was. Her figure was hidden by Edward when he stood before her. We were completely outnumbered. Soleil was at a great disadvantage.

.....If the maid who stayed back at the estate transmitted my message to Al, then it was possible he would come here. However, even now his figure was nowhere to be seen, now in this situation, no matter how much time I stall, I could already see how this would end.

“Moreover, the problem doesn’t stop here. That’s right, I’m talking about Silvia-chan.”

My little sister was far. Her trembling eyes were fixed on me. Her eyes were telling me, “Save me.”

“If her existence were to become known... in terms of lineage, she would become the major contender for the succession. That would be a problem. After all this time, if she appeared now, that would be very problematic!”

Whoosh! The sound of grass being curbed by the wind resounded and became the signal. The first one to move was as expected, Saion. His drawn sword glittered, in an instant, my vision was dyed blank.

“Even so, I won’t allow it!”

Raising his sword, Soleil exclaimed this. Violent sounds of metal colliding against each other echoed in my ears. It was possible that Saion was involved in the intelligence corps of his country, so he may be used to fighting with a real sword. But Soleil was a student. You couldn't say he had many experiences with actual fighting. Even an amateur like me could tell who had the advantage. Besides, even now Soleil had yet to fully understand the present situation. He seemed to be sticking to a defensive fight.

The two persons who had a friendly chat in the cafeteria were now facing each other. Had Saion anticipated such a future? No, maybe, he had never thought he would be confronting Soleil like this. If I hadn't brought him to this place, then Saion and Soleil would have never crossed sword like this.

"Soleil, you're really half-heart..... I even tried so hard to show you the right way."

"...What?"

"I kept encouraging you about Silvia-chan. That more than Miss Ilya, Silvia-chan was a better fit for you. I said it so many times, again and again. Because I knew things could have settled peacefully this way."

"What are you talking about...?"

"If Silvia-chan had become part of your marquis' house. Then this situation could have moved in a better direction. If her name had entered the register of your home and become one of yours, then it would have been the same thing as if she had pledged allegiance to this country."

"..."

"Because the name of your house is well-known in other countries. Silvia-chan would have become a people of this country in name and reality. By doing so, she could have completely separated herself from our country. Yes, in that case, there may have been room for negotiations. We could have left Silvia-chan at large and overlook her."

Soleil had already lost all his words and simply listened to Saion while warding off his sword.

“The situation we want to avoid the most is for Silvia-chan to continue existing as the “innocent daughter” of the earl. No, to be more accurate, if she had stayed in the estate as a secluded young lady, living without her existence being none by others, it would have worked out. And yet of all things, she had to start attend the academy.”

What a shame, said Saion as he shook his head and heaved a sigh.

“Even though the people of our country are trying to use Silvia-chan, aiming for the right opportunity to strike... For her to nonchalantly continue to attend the academy, it really makes me laugh. But you see, even us wanted to avoid a needless killing.”

So I took great pains to give you a choice. Saion swung his sword in a large movement. Soleil moaned. His sleeve was torn and blood was flowing. Without thinking, I gasped.

“Miss Ilya..... :”

Abruptly, my name was called. Saion shook the blood of his sword, looking at me.

“But Soleil said that..... That if it wasn’t you, if it wasn’t Ilya, it wouldn’t do.”

Hearing his words, my eyes opened wide. I couldn’t even answer anything back. It was completely inconceivable that Soleil had said such a thing.

“There was no room of maneuver for me, no place to interfere. So, you didn’t need to be so anxious.”

Soleil stepped forth as if to protect me and once again turned toward Saion. At that moment, a voice resounded, “You bastard, are you betraying us?” When I reflexively turned in that direction, Edward was directing his sword at the big man who should have been standing by his side. They were scowling at each other with a fierce glare, absolutely not looking like companions.

“It’s unfortunate but I never intended to be on your side from the start, so calling me a traitor isn’t right.”

Edward who had barely interjected in the conversation until now cheerfully grinned.

“...You don’t care about what’ll happen to your family?”

Saion asked him in a calm voice. He was still facing Soleil but I understood his question was for Edward. What was the thing Edward talked about when he mentioned “the one thing he had to protect?” Even without being told, everyone here knew. Surely, Soleil must have understood too. “Ed,” He started calling out to him but eventually, drew his lips together. In this situation, the meaning was that Edward changed to our side. He was exuding an air of determination.

“...Of course I’m hesitating. Naturally, I cannot say I don’t care what will happen to my family. But, they love me. These people would never forgive me if I become a traitor for them.”

So I won’t betray my friend! Soleil’s best friend firmly asserted so. Hearing this, Saion sneered.

“Well, well, well... what a wonderful friendship. But, Ed, that means... you have the resolution to die, right?”

You’re so foolish, so childish, he continued. He was a man who had crossed over countries for the sake of his brother-in-law, a man who had even made use of his friendship with Soleil. For Saion, Edward’s way of thinking was probably impossible to understand.

“.....Alright, now. Playtime’s over.”

A slender man who was looking at Saion's and Soleil's confrontation clapped his hands. He was probably going to assist Saion. He stood diagonally to Saion's back, facing Soleil. On the other hand, Edward and the large built man once again readied their swords. During the conversation, they had kept each other in check, not averting their confronting gazes from each other. Even so, Edward slightly changed his posture, his attitude showing he was trying to protect the nearby Silvia.

"It's a pity we couldn't come to an understanding."

I wondered who said this. Hearing these words which sound like a sentence to death, my hands unknowingly shook. Although my life or death was being haggled in front of my eyes, I couldn't do anything.

"Sorry but I've no intention to die!"

Edward's voice was bright. Was he pretending to be confident or did he truly think so from the bottom of his heart? He rushed toward the big man. As if in sync with his fluttering red hairs, blood danced in the wind. The difference in strength was clear. It was impossible for him who wasn't even an ordinary knight to fight evenly with someone who was clearly a professional. But he still tightly grasped his sword. Even if blood flew, he didn't show any sign of pulling back by even one step.

"...If the country we were born in had been different, then we might have become good friends. But, this is also fate."

When Saion swung his sword, Soleil also countered him. I was an amateur who didn't know much about combat, but since their physique was similar, it seemed that their strength rivaled each other. But currently, Soleil had to face two opponents. Saion had probably brought along with him the elites of the secret corps. From the perspective of their age, they couldn't possibly be students and it felt they were used to real fighting.

“And you cannot go against fate.”

Saion made a hard-to-read expression, as if he was laughing but also grieving. For the sake of his brother-in-law he pretended to be an overseas student and went to a foreign country as a spy. In terms of age he was the same as us, yet he had resolved to dirty his hands to defend what he had to protect.

“Everything was going great! If I could have used your complicated relationship. I could have suppressed this situation well!”

When Saion talked to me in the backyard, he spoke about his country. That marriages out of love were becoming commonplace. In his country right now, a huge change must be taking place. The main populace was probably at its core. That’s why, his and his brother-in-law’s standings were in a terribly dangerous position. According to his words, that time when Silvia’s mother sought asylum, that country seemed to also have been thrown in the mist of chaos. It was a country that had repeatedly been in conflict again and again like this. That might have been why he told us with gloomy eyes that he envied our peace. It was hard for me to say I understood his feelings, but I remembered this devoted thought of wanted to do one’s utmost for the sake of one precious thing.

“Soleil-sama!!”

The sun was setting, dyeing the surrounding in red, drowning out the scattered blood. The one who screamed was Silvia. The slender men had pierced Soleil’s shoulder with his sword. I almost let out a shriek when he groaned but I desperately held it down. I didn’t want to be in his way. I just heard that Silvia kept screaming.

I thought we’d lose. At this rate, Soleil will die. *Boom, boom*, my heart was making a hideous noise. Sweat was drenching my clenched fists. The same moment I felt scared, dizziness assault me as an oncoming premonition slowly rose in my chest. Peeping through the window of my room, a nameless black bird was looking toward me. That bird said he was named Crow, the bird portentous of ill-omen.

“Wait, please, wait.”

I haven't made my resolve yet. I still didn't know what I should do to lead this situation toward a good direction. My gaze roamed to the right, then the left. I took several deep breaths, trying to arrange my disordered breathing. Unable to put my mental state in order, I just hurried toward my sister. I knew something was about to happen. Meanwhile, Silvia's voice once again rang out, “...Soleil-sama!!”

.....However, it wasn't like Soleil was being driven to a corner. Before long he cut down the slender man, then quickly dodged. His sword raised in front of his face blocked Saion's attack.

“...Ah” A voice full of admiration unintentionally leaked out. It sounded distant. In front of my eyes, the moved their exchanged as they stir up their sword seemed to slow down. Everything around me seemed to proceed to slow down. I could now perfectly see the sword movements that my eyes couldn't keep with before. Soon, Soleil's sword pierced Saion's abdomen. The way he screamed and spat out blood was rather disgusting. I couldn't help but feel scared. But, that's why I was convinced it was Soleil's victory.

The fact I wasn't feeling relived yet was because I could guess what would happen after this. The thought we had won only lasted a moment. Far from losing their fighting spirit, Saion's eyes shone with a will even stronger than before. The dull light in his pair of eyes sharpened and he looked toward Silvia. I wondered if anyone noticed it. Not even Soleil who was tightly grasping the sword piercing him could have guessed Saion's intention.

It was the will to protect to the end the thing he cherished, no matter what he had to sacrifice for it. The firm conviction to not let anyone get in his way and hinder him. The determination to present his own life in order to carry out his ideal.

I also used to be like that in the olden days. That's why I understood Saion had used his body to seal Soleil's sword and moved to fulfill his objective. He let go of his sword, then threw away the short dagger concealed in his sleeves toward Silvia.

I thought I wouldn't made it, but the feeling similar to a threatening sense of duty to make it in time moved my feet. My body moved faster than my thoughts. After

receiving a strong shock around the lower part of my chest, I understood exactly what had happened. I didn't feel pain. Because I had previously been assailed by a more intense suffering than this. My nose and mouth closed at the same time and I became unable to breathe. I thought somewhere inside my mind that this sound similar to a hiccup I suddenly made, was because I failed to breathe. In my back, my little sister gasped. This sound resounded in my ears.

"...Ahah, ahahahahah !! How funny. How, very, funny."

The figure of Saion collapsing while laughing disappear from my view. No, it's not that. I couldn't keep him in my field of vision. I also couldn't stand. Because in my chest, the haft of a dagger was sticking out.

"There is no point no matter how much you protect your little sister! Her life will always be targeted from now on...!"

I thought while listening to the distant screams of Saion. His words had a point. Until its homeland regains its peace, Silvia will surely keep being targeted.

.....In that case, all the more reasons to leave that child in Soleil's care. The overwhelming political power of the marquis's house will become Silvia's shield.

"Big sister! Big, sister..."

For a few seconds, or maybe a few minutes, I felt my consciousness flying. Silvia's voice brought me back to reality. While I was unaware of it, our surrounding had regained its silence. Frustrated by my blurring field of vision, I blinked several times. When I finally managed to clear it, I saw black hair and a pair of blue eyes. Soleil was peering into my face. That namely meant that we had reached the conclusion. And the fact he was here probably meant that Edward's fight had also ended. "Ilya." While staring at the face of my fiancé who quietly called my name, I called out the person who should also have been close by.

“...Edward-sama, can you take away Silvia?”

Despite the fact I should have been in so much pain I thought I couldn't breathe, unexpectedly, I could speak firmly. “There is something, I want to talk, with Soleil-sama.” Now that I thought about it, there was no pain. Only a strange sensation as if my pulse was festering.

“Big sister...”

Edward pulled away my little sister who was trying to cling to me who lay collapsed on the ground. As I thought, he had already suppressed his opponent. He seemed to have been injured, but it seemed it wasn't endangering his life. Even though blood was shed, my wish had come true. The fact his face was distorted, was probably because he was feeling remorse for having betrayed his friend, even if it was only a pretense.

“Soleil, sama.”

Soleil who had lift my upper body in his arms nodded, “Yes.” I thought it was a gentle voice. It felt so, for some reason.

“I'll take you to a doctor immediately, so...”

He tried to lift me but it didn't go well and my body once again lay on the ground. “Damn” He clicked his tongue between his bitter smile, something that was very unusual for his normal self. His arm seemed to be considerably injured. He could probably not put any strength in it. Despite this, he was struggling hard in order to hold my body.

“Soleil-sama, Soleil-sama... Let me down. Saion-sama's acolytes, there might be more of them. You have to get, away from here.”

“Alright, I understand. But I can't leave you behind.”

“...It’s impossible. For the you right now, it is impossible, to take me along.”

I didn’t feel any pain. Neither cold nor warmth. But even then, I was running out of breath.

“Take Silvia to a place far away from here, please. With E-Edward-sama, the both of you, protect that child. As for me... we’ll part here.”

“...Such a thing! I cannot possibly do that!”

“No, you can... You have to do that.”

“Impossible! I can’t! I can’t... leave you like this...!”

Soleil’s arms wrapped around my back. Then he tried to carry me, but he couldn’t. Why, doing all this after this struggle to the death... with his body full of wounds. Not only Soleil but Edward too could be said to be in the same situation. They should not have any spare energy left. Moreover, Saion’s comrades might appear at any moment. They must leave this place as soon as possible. Everyone understood that, and yet, they didn’t move because of me.

“Soleil-sama, look... please look at me.”

“ ... ”

“It’s already hopeless for me... Isn’t it?”

As he was crouching down to hug me in his arm, I touched his cheek. His pale skin had no warmth. No, that’s not it. My fingers had lost all sensation. That’s why I couldn’t feel the warmth of his body.

“You have to... make the right assessment of this situation. Because you will, eventually, become a marquis. The things you need to cherish, and those you need to take care of, you must make sure of them... Please, judge, what you ought to do.”

“I can’t, such a thing, there is no way I could do that...”

Soleil who kept repeating “I can’t” was like a child. I wondered if it was my imagination but the corner of his long and slit eyes appeared to be reddened, as if tears were hanging at their rim. However, my vision was blurred, and I couldn’t see his face clearly. Was he regretting his dying fiancé?

“...Soleil-sama, it’s alright already. I mean, you, do not love me, don’t you?”

“...Ilya.”

“You said you cherished me. But, you do not love me, and I too, I also... that’s right.”

“...”

“I do not, love, you.”

These words I thought I would never say, smoothly overflow along with my breath. Even though I thought I couldn’t say a lie. If it wasn’t for my sake but for his, then I could. These words were said to help him take a decision. “...It’s a lie.” Soleil who whispered that, embraced my shoulders. Maybe he was trying to ascertain something but he stared at my face at a distance close enough for our eyelashes to touch.

He was the same as me when my mother died. And I was in the same situation as my mother at that time.

I remembered how my mother who died once in front of me, had opened her eyes wide at her very last moment. These light green eyes of her had stared fixedly at me. As if she couldn’t close her eyelids. I was the same. I didn’t want to turn away from Soleil’s face for the shortest second even. I was afraid that this face I loved would disappear from my view, even if it was just for a moment. Until my very last instant, I wanted to engrave his face in my eyes. So that even if my life ran out, I wouldn’t forget it. And so, I couldn’t even blink.

.....I wondered if my mother might have felt like this too.

If it was the case. Then there was an inconsistency in the words she left behind. If she

had truly not loved me, then it would have been better to quickly close her eyes. She didn't do that. She eagerly gazed at me. Maybe I couldn't see the true meaning behind these words because I was so upset. These words that were whispered like a refusal at that time, their true meaning was...

Ah, now, I see. I finally, understood. Mother had surely said that.

"Sorry, Ilya."

"I, have, never been able to love you,"

"well..."

That was, in other words, the substitute for "I love you." She might have tried to give me, who had to witness her death, some relief. So, I'll follow her example. I have to achieve this.

"Soleil-sama. Please go... Go... You said you cherished me, then, keep your promise..."

"Ilya,"

"Hands, don't let go. That's child's hands, grasp it... protect her..."

My throat was making a whizzing sound. I could no longer speak. Soleil, who was staring into my eyes, strongly closed his eyes. Then he touched the back of my head and my shoulder, and let out one lone sob. Then, he slowly let go of my body.

"...Sister! Big sister."

Silvia who was held by Edward and probably couldn't move called me.

"I... I, know... I know everything...!"

Beyond my darkening sight, I heard the voice of my little sister who was stretching her hand toward me. I knew Edward was holding this little body of her, trying to take her away. When I tried to say it was fine like this, I realized my voice wouldn't come out.

"I always knew! That big sister, in reality, you truly love me!"

My field of vision seemed to be eaten away by darkness. When I looked up, the twilight sky was darkening, as if a hole was spreading out bit by bit. I wondered when the sun had set.

"After all, if it wasn't the case... if it wasn't like this... how would you call this...! It's because you love me right! That's why you protected me..."

Her voice, was getting distant.

"I know you did that because you loved me! I know you love me, big sister! And so, and so... I also loved you..."

My crying and shouting little sister. My lovely, little sister. If this is love, very well. Then I'll call this self-satisfaction love. Being at your side, hugging you, grasping your hand. I was taught that this alone wasn't love.

.....The ribbon Edward had given me in jail. At that time I thought it wasn't familiar but... If it's the me "now," I knew what was this ribbon.

When I drown in the bathtub and lay down in bed, that child brought me tea leaves. The glass bottle containing it was wrapped in a red ribbon. I thought my little sister must have put it to decorate the bottle..... Silvia's belonging brought to me in the prison looked like that ribbon. The Silvia who had been murdered in my first life had... on her way to the theater, or possibly on her way back, she must have bought this ribbon. Maybe, she had even chosen it for me. Although now, I would never know.

The act of only displaying something wishing it would be understood by the other is not love.

Silvia... sorry. I wanted to say I'm sorry but...

It's already pitch-black. I couldn't see anything. The real end was drawing near.

I wanted to become someone loved by her parents. I wanted to become like my little sister. I wanted to become a lady befitting of being Soleil's fiancé. If I got married, I wanted to do the right things as Soleil's wife, I wanted to carry out justice, I wanted to live without bending my own beliefs. But all these me I wanted to become, I couldn't achieve even one of them.

It's not bad. If it's that kind of life, then surely, it's not bad. I thought so, and at the moment I guessed was my last, I took a deep breath.

Because I was looking up, the voice fell right onto me.

"Finally, I've found you."

"My princess."



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